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STORIES



THE RUSTED JUNGLE

By Milton Lesser

THE PSIONIC MOUSETRAP

A Thrilling Novelette By Murray Leinster



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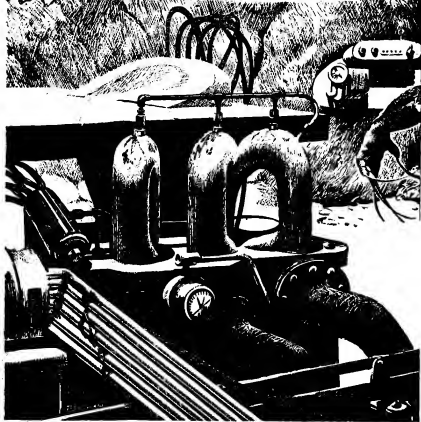
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The RUSTED JUNGLE

by MILTON LESSER





The wild-eyed monster in the mirror was—himself!



To survive the horrors of an atom war, he slept for unaccounted aeons in a subterranean crypt. Then one day the radiation counters stopped their clicking, the barrier rolled back and he stepped into a world of rusted metal and horrible monsters—and hundreds of women without men!

THE morning star was a bright stubborn pinpoint of light in the eastern sky when Severing awoke. His first thought was that something had gone wrong with the mechanism. He had been sleeping only hours, not years or centuries or millenia.

He stood up and stretched

languidly, then heard the whirring sound of vaguely remembered machinery.

When the radiation counters report that Earth is once again fit for life, this knowledge will automatically shut the animation suspension machinery.

The machine went on pur-

ring. Severing walked to the wall and pressed the button which suffused the small room with dim light. Grimly, he realized that something had gone wrong with the machinery. The last of the biophysicists who had devised it was dead. Radiation poisoning. Severing couldn't fix it, nor any of the five hundred people who still slept in the vaults below him. The thick lead shields protected them from radiation, of course, but if the surface was still a seething maelstrom of gamma radiation . . .

Severing shuddered — and saw his image in the mirror on the far wall of the room.

Severing gawked.

He didn't know how much time had passed. Probably, he would never know. But it was far more than hours or days or . . .

During suspended animation, the hair and fingernails will continue to grow indefinitely. This is why we have provided each individual with the necessary tonsorial equipment.

So, thought Severing, remembering these words from the instructions he had received—how long ago?—the old boys were right. Severing's hair hung in a tangled, unkempt mat, not to his

shoulders, not to his waist, but trailing down to the floor. His beard, a great fuzzy tangle of hair, fell to his ankles. And those of his fingernails which had not snapped off when he stood up were curving, yellow, and more than a yard long!

Eagerly now, Severing cropped his hair close, cut off his beard, shaved his face and applied depilatory to the rest of his naked body. He found food concentrates on the shelf near the mirror, and gobbled them quickly. He was the guardian. He alone had awakened, his crypt thrusting him forth from its mechanical womb when the radiation counters had stopped their incessant clicking—after how many years had passed?

It was Severing's job now to explore the surface above them. If he found things in order, it would be a simple matter to awaken his sleeping companions.

Yesterday—it still felt to Severing as if only a night had passed—yesterday was July 1, 1958. Humanity in its death throes. The extreme left blaming the extreme right and the extreme right blaming the extreme left and as ever the great mass of people in the middle squeezed helplessly in the giant vise of destruction.

Five hundred survivors? Severing's five hundred. There might be others. There might be—almost anything. This was something Severing had to find out.

He went to the closet and took out his clothing. Ten minutes later he was dressed in a pink, tab-collared shirt, a black knit tie, natty gray flannels, a pair of cordovan loafers. He strapped the pistol belt self-consciously around his waist under the jacket. Now, what the devil would he need the ugly .45 caliber automatic for? Severing's neat business suit was incongruous enough under the circumstances, but the automatic made him feel mildly ridiculous.

Curtis Severing. Twenty-seven. No, a hundred and twenty-seven, or two-hundred and twenty-seven, or three, four, five—x-hundred and twenty-seven. Bright young advertising executive. Really going places. Until the war. He would have been drafted, but there was no time. The war had lasted two weeks. Everyone had lost. A group of scientists had been prepared, though, and Severing's five hundred, still sleeping in their crypts, was the result.

Madison Avenue, thought Severing. Gone.

And cocktails with the client in Cheerio's. Gone.

And Jones Beach.

And Ebbett's Field.

And T.W.A., income taxes, the latest Senate filibuster, trotting races at Westbury, the weather forecasts which never happened, chewing gum, the cigarette-cancer controversy, the pounding, clattering subway, and good food, good books, good everything.

And Mary-Jean, who had died in the first raid on Flushing. Gone.

Severing climbed the two flights of stairs to the surface, up past the gray lead shielding which had protected five hundred people—for what? A grim, radiation-ruined world? A sterile planet? The bare possibility of ekeing out an existence and surviving a generation or two before the inevitable happened?

Severing reached the surface and smiled bleakly. The scientists should have provided him with more than his gray flannels. The morning was clear and cold, with a bitter wind howling down the Hudson canyon. Trembling, Severing turned up the collar of his inadequate jacket and set out across the frozen ground.

For Lauri, of the tribe of Wehawk, the throbbing rhythms on the great cliff overlooking the river and the ruined city beyond it had been part of life. A whole mythology had been developed to explain the sounds. There were gods in the cliff at that point, slumbering gods, and now Lauri had been sent to investigate why the slumbering gods were suddenly silent.

She walked along boldly, barefoot on the frozen ground, the thick animal skin covering her body loosely from neck to knees. She had slain the bear with her own hunting knife and without the help of her older brother, Pawl. She wore the good black skin as proof she was afraid of nothing, not even the slumbering gods. She rounded an abutment of the bare rock, and abruptly flattened her lithe form against the ground.

Something was approaching.

Lauri sucked in her breath and held it. Her fingers found the hilt of the long hunting knife, Bear Slayer. Lauri waited.

The thing came on noisily, pounding the frozen ground with each step as if it wanted to see how much noise it

could make. It rounded the abutment—

Lauri gasped in surprise. It was a man, if a strangely dressed one whose teeth were chattering against the cold. From the look of him, the man belonged to no tribe Lauri had ever encountered. Since there were only five men—including Lauri's brother—in the entire Wehawk tribe, this man was a valuable find.

"Hello there!" the man said. "I'll be darned, it's a girl."

"Stop," ordered Lauri. "Come no further. You're my prisoner."

"You're *what*?"

"I claim you for the Wehawk women."

"You do which?" drawled the man, smiling slightly. He was making fun of her for some obscure reason, and it infuriated Lauri. She stood there and bared her teeth and thought, It's not for me; I don't want a man yet. It's for my sisters and cousins of the Wehawk. But by N'Yawk, if he doesn't come peacefully, I'll drag him all the way back to Wehawk.

Lauri held the knife in her right hand and beckoned with her left. "Come with me," she said. "We must go back to Wehawk."

"You mean there are more

of you? The human race wasn't destroyed?"

"Enough," said Lauri suspiciously. The man was lulling her with words, but the bulge under his sack-like upper garment might have been a small club. She leaped at him suddenly, grabbing the stringy black thing which hung from his neck with one hand and reaching for the club with the other. If she pulled on the stringy black thing, it seemed to choke him. She wondered why he wore it and decided it must have some obscure totemistic origin in his tribe.

"Leave go of that gun, you little fool!" the man shouted. Gun? The stringy black garment? No, he seemed more concerned over the small, strangely shaped club Lauri had extracted from under the gray sack he wore. He tried to grab it back from her, but refused to fight. Lauri was ready to use some of the fighting tricks her brother Pawl had taught her, but the man's resistance was more verbal than physical. Abruptly, she let go of the black stringy thing and ran away with the small hard object the man had called a gun.

She darted nimbly off among the rocks, the man following her clumsily. She

could have escaped easily, she realized. But if he was so interested in this gun thing, she would flee slowly and let him pursue her all the way to Wehawk.

And then, looking back over her shoulder, Lauri tripped. She went sprawling, but clung to the gun grimly. It must have been valuable. It must—Lauri yelped. The gun-thing jumped in her hand, slamming back against her palm with such force that it knocked her over on her back. At the same time, it roared and seemed to spit a quick, angry tongue of flame.

Lauri didn't know whether to hurl it away and kill the man who had owned it or hurl it away and run or hold onto it and guard it with her life because it certainly seemed the most unique thing she had ever encountered. The *Amazing*, the sacred book of the Wehawks, told of such loud explosive things. They were deadly unless you knew how to use them, but once you mastered them, you might visit N'Yawk itself with safety, this despite the B.e.m.s which stalked its silent stone canyons, straight out of the pages of the sacred *Amazing* as they had been predicted so long ago.

"Keep away," warned

Lauri as the man approached. "I'll make it blast again." Lauri had no idea how to make the gun-thing blast again, but the word blast was also straight out of the sacred *Amazing*, and might impress this man.

"You're going to kill someone, young lady. Watch out!"

But Lauri clung to the gun-thing stubbornly, holding it by the round curving metal grip and toying with the tongue of metal which protruded above it.

"You crazy fool, that's the trigger."

Lauri snickered and taunted the man and stuck her tongue out, then turned and bolted across the rocks, pausing every now and then to let him catch up. It was as she thought. With the gun-thing she would lead him all the way to Wehawkw.

That crazy girl is going to kill herself, or me, Severing thought as he plunged recklessly across the rocks after her. She was heading down toward the river now, sure-footed as a goat. Severing's breath came in great sobbing gasps as he tried to keep up with her. At first he thought the gun had been a needless caution, but if there were wild creatures like this girl roam-

ing the rocks of the Jersey side of the river, there might be wild animals too. That was an animal skin she wore, Severing observed. At all costs, he'd have to get back the gun.

Just then, it went off again. The girl flung it from her in dismay, then changed her mind and scrambled down the rocks after it. Severing clambered down after her, leaping and slipping from rock to rock. They reached the gun at the same time, clawing for it.

The gun had come to rest on a ledge. Below it, the rock sloped precipitously toward the ice-choked river. Severing had a moment to think a lot of time had passed or the climate around New York had changed, or both. Then, both holding the .45 and rolling together, Severing and the girl lost their footing and tumbled down the steep slope.

Severing climbed groggily to his feet at the base of the incline. His gray flannels were in tatters and the icy river wind knifed at him. The girl was also on her feet and held the gun as if she had learned how to use it after the second accidental shot. She pointed it at Severing, then gestured to a canoe which had been dragged up on the narrow strip of beach, and said, "Get in."

"Where are we going?" Severing asked. First of all, he had to explore the city. Although, if the girl could live here, then the people sleeping in the crypt could live too. The radiation counters hadn't lied.

"We're going back to Wehawk," the girl said. She spoke a slurred, hurried English. And she had, Severing observed wryly, assumed command of the situation.

After the girl floated it, Severing climbed into the canoe. He grasped the gunwales and sat down in the prow while the girl began to paddle away from shore, careful to avoid the drifting ice.

Severing sat there for ten minutes, catching his wind. The girl was preoccupied with paddling, kneeling there and thrusting her paddle into the water with sure strokes, the gun resting on the bottom of the canoe at her feet. If Severing were to lunge for it, he thought he'd have a good chance of getting it.

He got up awkwardly, leaned forward, groped for the .45. The girl met his attempt with a blow from her paddle. Severing parried it with his forearm and felt a sudden numbing pain as the paddle struck. But the paddle slipped from the girl's fingers,

fell into the cold water with a splash, and quickly drifted away with the current.

"Now look what you've done," the girl said.

"It wasn't my fault. If you'll behave like a civilized human being . . ." But Severing sensed the futility of arguing, and lapsed into silence.

Caught by the currents, the canoe drifted eastward, toward New York. Through the pale cold morning light Severing could see the gaunt towers of the deserted city, like impossibly huge tombstones upon which mankind's epitaph was written in invisible letters, some of them complete, their spires rearing against the cold blue sky, and some of them broken stumps, bare to the girders, festering in the ruined city.

"Can you swim?" the girl asked abruptly.

"Why, yes. But—"

"Well, we may have to. If we hit any of this floating ice, we're going to sink. Why couldn't you come back to Wehawk with me without causing all this trouble?"

Severing explained patiently, "My people have been asleep for a long time. Now that the air is fit to breathe again—"

"The air has always been fit to breathe."

"Then you and your people have adapted to it. There's no reason why I should go back to Wehawk—" Weehawken, thought Severing "—with you unless I want to."

"There is reason enough."

"I have my own—"

"Fool! There are but five men in all the Wehawk tribe, two of them old and doddering and one a mere boy. My brother Pawl says if we don't capture other men, our tribe will die out. But all the other tribes have the same trouble. Male children are not being born and—"

"Look out!" cried Severing suddenly.

A huge slab of ice scraped the gunwale of the canoe, crushed it like cardboard. Freezing water rushed in as Severing leaped to his feet. He barely had time to strip off his torn jacket and get rid of his loafers before the canoe went under. The girl quickly unfastened the heavy animal skin she wore, standing naked in the sinking canoe for one brief moment before she dived into the water.

It was so cold, Severing could hardly swim. He surfaced, choking and spitting water. The canoe was gone. The ice was floating and

rocking all about them. Severing wondered how long it would take before his body became completely numb. He saw the girl, half a dozen feet from him, stroking out for the nearer shore which, at this point, was Manhattan Island. She looked back once to see that Severing was following her, then continued swimming.

The cold got to the girl first, Severing discovered with some surprise. He caught up with her as her strokes became slower, weaker. He looked at her and spluttered and said, "Are you all right?"

"I—I can't—"

Severing got his arm around her neck from behind and began to tow her toward shore. He didn't know how far it was. Five hundred yards? Less? An easy swim, but not in ice-choked waters. Severing stroked grimly with his free arm, and soon the whole world dissolved into blue-white horror. The churning ice, the freezing water which now felt thick as syrup, the dead weight Severing was dragging behind him, the endless, numbing, stiffening cold. . . .

His head bumped something, was forced under. Gasping and choking on a

mouthful of brackish tide-water, Severing lost his hold on the girl. He bobbed to the surface and saw what was left of an ancient, time-rotted pier. He groped about for the girl and called, but there was no answer. Cursing, he surface-dived and found her. Somehow, he brought her to the surface. He bicycled his legs to keep from sinking, held the girl's head above water with one hand and slapped it with the other until her eyes opened and she stared at him without comprehension.

"Listen," Severing said harshly. "I can't stay afloat much longer. I'm going to get you up on my shoulders. I want you to climb up on the pier. Understand?"

"Umm. Ummm—mm—"

"Listen to me, damn you! We're both going to die unless you climb up there."

Severing went under again and waited there, holding his breath, until the girl's bare legs were on his shoulders. Then he grabbed the rotten, submerged pilings and pulled them both upward.

It seemed an eternity had passed before the girl's weight was gone. Severing clung there with numb fingers, then felt hands tugging at his shoulders from above. With

the girl's help, he managed to climb out of the water. He flung himself, sobbing and exhausted, on the pulpy wood.

Something soft as a feather but cold as ice touched the bare skin of his back through his torn shirt.

Snow.

Fat soft snowflakes tumbling down out of a gray sky; now falling gently, now caught and swirled by the gusts of wind. The girl was naked. Severing was stripped to the waist except for the tattered remains of his shirt. This, Severing thought with bitter amusement, was his awakening. *Homo sapiens*, onward and upward.

Yeah. *Homo sapiens* was going to freeze to death unless he found some shelter—and soon. Severing stood up and lurched unsteadily from the pier. The concrete beyond it was buckled and broken. Severing shivered with the cold. The long night wasn't over. It was just beginning.

Something howled not too far off in the city. There was an answering, distant howl, and other sounds, eerie, unfamiliar sounds.

"Let's go find some place where we can keep warm," Severing said.

The howling came again. Closer.

The girl said, "The B.e.m.s."

Pennsylvania Station was a bleak, echoing ruin, but the roof seemed whole. Severing led the girl inside and it was warmer, but not warm enough. What was left of Severing's shirt had frozen to his body. He ripped it off and could feel the ice in his hands. He looked at the girl. She wasn't complaining, but her lips were blue. Every now and then she would pound her fists against her chest above her bare breasts for the little warmth that gave her.

Severing led the girl in silence across the great bare rotunda, his feet completely numb, striking the cold floor without sensation. Near the information desk there were stacks of leaflets which had never been distributed—millions of them.

Severing read:

URGENT! Don't trample! Don't stampede! Your neighbor wants to save his children as much as you want to save yours. Disorderly conduct in Pennsylvania Station will be punished by death. The children **MUST** be evacuated. By order of the Commanding General, First Army.

The directive had been issued, according to the date on top, on July 2, 1958. One day

after Severing and his five hundred companions had submitted to the long sleep. There had been a few speeches, and a wild, last-day-of-life celebration, but in the general chaos the experiment had gone virtually unnoticed by the public.

And now—this.

The girl screamed. Severing looked where she was looking, and could feel the hackles rising on the back of his neck. There were skeletons, thousands of them. Small, mostly. Children. It hadn't been a bomb. There was no bomb damage. It had been radiation. Severing prodded one of the skeletons gingerly with his foot. It crumbled immediately into dust.

Suddenly, the madness of it all came to him. The war which never solved anything. The people, everywhere, perishing. He shook his fist and may have gone a little mad himself at that moment, for he began to shout words—angry and disjointed and almost meaningless.

Severing roared and heard the echo of the roar and roared back at it. He went right on roaring while one small part of his mind remained to tell him he was hysterical. He had finally understood the enormity of what had hap-

pened and couldn't accept it, couldn't adjust, couldn't . . .

The girl stood there, quite calmly slapping his face with hard, stinging blows. This was her world. It had developed slowly, generation after generation. For Severing, it was a house of cards which had come tumbling down all at once. He took the blows and let them chase the hysteria. He felt washed out, drained of an old life which could never be again and looking forward to a new life which wasn't and might never be and then he heard the wild howling again.

Inside the station? Severing thought so. The girl had stopped slapping him. The hysteria had passed on, like a wave. Severing went looking for something to start a fire.

There were matches in a drawer of the curving information desk. There was paper for kindling and the great stacks of leaflets which would burn almost like wood and for hours without stopping.

In five minutes, Severing had a bright fire going, its flames dancing and casting shadows which jumped and darted on the distant walls. Severing could feel the warmth to the very core of

his being. And for the first time he was able to see the girl clearly. She sat there, not facing him, with her knees drawn up almost against her chest and her arms circling her legs, her bare skin rose-glowing in the firelight. The long curving line of her back, her waist, her flanks, her thighs, her calves and ankles—formed a simple, graceful picture, Severing thought, which an experienced artist might be able to capture in seconds.

"Why do you keep looking at me?" the girl asked.

"Forgive me."

"I still don't know what tribe you're from."

"It isn't important, except that my tribe demands I do certain things, which is why I can't go back with you to Wehawk."

Severing could see the muscles stiffen slightly across the girl's back. She wasn't willing to accept that. She'd mentioned something about an over-abundance of women in her tribe. She wanted Severing for stud. To her, of course, it was deadly serious. Eventually, it might assume serious meaning for Severing too. But right now his thinking was still Madison Avenue oriented. He could picture himself telling the gang in

Cheerio's that a gorgeous wild girl with whom he'd just swam the Hudson, nude, wanted him to come home with her not so he could make her happy but so he could satisfy certain obvious yearnings in her cousins and sisters.

Gently, Severing said, "I don't even know your name."

"I am Lauri, sister of Pawl."

This Pawl must be some stuff, thought Severing. Every chance she got, Lauri mentioned him. Well, if there were but five males in the Wehawk tribe, two of them too old for Lauri's cousins and one too young, Pawl would be as popular and sought after as cold spring water on the Sahara Desert.

"How do you call yourself?" Lauri asked.

"Name's Curtis."

"Curt-iss," flavored Lauri.

"Curtis Severing."

"Seven — sevel — Curt-iss is enough. The reason you must come back with me to the Wehawk—"

But Lauri never got to finish her thought. The howling sound came again, much closer now. Lauri leaned against Severing's legs, trembling. It sounded something like a dog and something like a wolf, thought Severing, and then again, not quite like either. It

had seemed to come from somewhere within the rotunda.

Suddenly, Severing heard a faint padding sound, the quick scurrying of animal footpads across the stone floor. One creature? It had been more than one, Severing thought. The firelight leaped high as Severing fed another stack of leaflets to it. On the far wall of the rotunda, appearing for an instant and then vanishing so quickly that Severing wondered if his eyes were playing tricks on him, were two dog-like shadows, big-eared, sharp-snouted, long-toothed.

"I hope you can use that knife," Severing said grimly.

"Against B.e.m.s? It wouldn't hurt them."

"What is this B.e.m.s you keep talking about?"

"Why, B.e.m.s! According to the *Amazing*, our sacred book, they are the creatures which inhabit far places, strange places. Such as N'Yawk, although the *Amazing* is never clear."

"Your sacred book, the—uh —*Amazing*?"

"It was the one book we had left in Wehawk after the war, the one contact with our gods who had died in the great fighting so we might

live. You will see when I take you to Wehawk."

"Young lady, you—"

The unseen hounds howled again. The sounds echoed in the rotunda, but Severing thought they had come from north and south. Perhaps a pack of the unseen hounds made Pennsylvania Station its home, thought Severing, although he did not know what they would hunt in the ghost of a city.

"Are they afraid of fire?" Severing demanded.

"When they're hungry, they are afraid of nothing. I have been to N'Yawk before."

Severing hated to leave the warmth of the fire, but if it lulled them with a false sense of security and left them as prey for the hounds . . . "Come on," said Severing. "We'd better get out of here. Do you think we can find another boat down on the piers?"

"Perhaps, but we'll never find our way across the river in a snowstorm."

The howling was very close now, apparently just beyond the glow cast by the fire. Severing whirled and waved his arms and gave vent to a deep-throated animal sound. It almost frightened him, coming from his own throat like that, but it did the trick. Severing

could hear the unseen beast retreating.

He stood up and for an instant let the firelight bathe his weary muscles in its warm restful glow. Then he took Lauri's hand and started walking.

Even before leaving the rotunda, Severing felt numb with cold. His body still remembered the fire, and craved it. He wondered how long a man could keep moving in cold like that before the desire to stop and rest and probably sleep without waking again would be too strong to resist.

"Look out!" Lauri screamed.

She hurled herself suddenly at him, tumbling to the floor with him as something hurtled by scant inches over Severing's head, something large and—growling.

The hound alighted on all fours and howled its disappointment. It had been lurking for them, on a ledge above one of the ticket windows. It whirled about now and, growling hideously, leaped at them.

Lauri met it with her knife, buried the blade to the hilt in the pelted, muscular shoulder. In the dim light, Severing got his one good look at the hound, before it retreated to

lick its wounds. The hound was enormous, as tall at the shoulder as a Great Dane but built more along the lines of a Boxer, with massive chest and shoulders. Radiation-induced mutation, Severing thought.

"Better start running," Lauri panted. "When he realizes I've done my worst and haven't given him more than a flesh wound, he'll come back."

"He'll probably bring his friends, too," said Severing, and smiled grimly. He thought it amazing how the human brain could adjust so readily to a new environment, an unexpected situation. Already he was able to joke about their predicament. He might very well perish in it, but there was a chance not merely for himself but for all humanity if he could find the time—and the inclination—to joke.

They sprinted across the rotunda. Severing didn't have to look back to know the hounds—three of them now—were following. At any moment he expected to feel the enormous fangs fasten on his flying legs, feel the strength of the great snout pulling him down, feel . . .

And then they were outside. Staring out across the ruined city, aware that the snow-

storm had stopped, Severing felt a deep sense of loss. This was the city he had known, the life he had known, the human society he had known. Tall, silent spires now, girders black with age, buckled avenues which were funnels for the river wind now, and nothing more. City of eight million people, what lost dreams. . . .

What living nightmare! Horror piling on horror. Severing felt giddy. He was going to roar again, to laugh. He would surrender himself that way and have done with it. A man had no time to feel sorry for himself, though, for every time he thought of the lost dream, he became aware of the present reality, not dream but nightmare.

Like the thing in the street.

It was bigger than Severing. Probably bigger than Severing and Lauri together. How much bigger, he didn't care to find out. It had a body like a caterpillar and was heading for Pennsylvania Station across the buckling concrete of what had been, an age ago, Eighth Avenue. It had a sharp snout almost like an anteater's. It was looking at Severing and Lauri, appraising them, perhaps won-

dering with the small brain hidden in the small skull if it were hungry and Severing and Lauri were worth the trouble.

And then, all at once, the three hounds hurtled from the station and Severing discovered what they hunted in the memory-choked streets of New York with their piles of rusty metal along the curbs which had, one day long ago, been automobiles. They hunted the caterpillar things.

They charged, three together, a small pack, the huge jaws snapping as the caterpillar thing writhed and tried to slip through the buckling concrete which had engendered it.

Severing had one brief look at the giant, sluggish caterpillar being torn to shreds, then plunged west toward the river with Lauri through the two inches of snow which had fallen. What time was it now, Severing wondered as they ran, then realized the conventional hour hand, minute hand and second hand were all meaningless in a world without civilization. Early afternoon? Probably. They would have several hours more of daylight before the coming of darkness.

Panting, they reached West Street and the piers. Severing

spotted a small dinghy drawn up on the deck of a cabin cruiser which listed heavily to port and seemed about ready to sink. He congratulated himself and yanked at the prow of the dinghy, which he could reach by leaning from the pier, Lauri holding his hips, balancing him.

He congratulated himself too soon. The dinghy crumbled to dust at his touch. Dry rot. The cabin cruiser itself seemed to shudder, like a dying animal, and slipped slowly below the surface of the water. Smiling, Lauri hauled Severing back to safety.

"Sometimes my people or the people of other tribes come to New York and do not survive. They leave a canoe along the river, or course. It is such a canoe we must find."

"But what if we're mistaken?" Severing asked. "What if they haven't been killed? What if they intend to use the canoe themselves but are tardy and we beat them to it?"

"In that case," Lauri said completely without humor, "they will have to find someone else's canoe. If you're as cold as I am, Curt-iss, you'll want to hurry."

Severing was as cold. Severing was colder. They hurried. Severing wondered how long

it would take before they froze to death.

Food, Severing thought, hours later. Something to chew on. A hot drink. A scalding drink, blistering the internal linings but making you feel wonderful all over. Severing was beyond being able to conjure up the feel of the warming drink. There was nothing, had never been, would never be anything but the cold, the numbing, choking, killing cold.

They had found no food. They had found no canoe, although Severing had insisted on examining two more dinghys and a power launch, all of which had crumbled into dust at his touch. What they had found, however, had kept them going. It was a blanket. Lauri thought it was of the tribe of Brokin which lived across the eastern waters. Severing hadn't cared whose blanket it was, but with a kind of numb excitement had watched Lauri slit it in half with her knife and gravely give him one half, wrapping her naked body in the other.

And they had kept running. No words passed between them after that. Severing thought he would have to do some thawing before he could talk again.

It was at that point, with but an hour of daylight remaining and the snow beginning to sift down again, that they found the canoe. Severing discovered he could talk. "Canoe," he babbled. "It's a canoe, canoe, canoe . . ."

They ran to it. Inside were two paddles and a leather pouch. With trembling fingers, Lauri opened the pouch. Inside was dried meat, frozen solid but edible. Lauri hacked at it with her knife, handing solid chunks of the stuff to Severing and sucking on others herself until they had thawed sufficiently to chew.

Still numb with cold, Severing managed to get the canoe into the water, then shinnied down the wood, piling after Lauri, who was already seated in the stern of the little craft, huddling in her blanket. The piling began to crumble, dry rot and wet rot sharing the honors for its demise, before Severing was half way down. He tumbled into the freezing water and lost his blanket, swimming chilled and half-conscious to the canoe. Lauri helped him aboard and he lay there with the sub-zero wind freezing the river water before it could roll from his body.

Faintly, he heard an anguished scream from shore as

Lauri paddled their canoe away. "They've returned for their boat," he heard her say. "They look like Redbankers."

Apparently the Wehawk didn't like Redbankers. Lauri paddled away from shore without looking back. Severing, who now was beyond feeling cold, beyond feeling anything except mild surprise that he was still alive, kneeled near the prow of the canoe, picked up the second paddle in stiff fingers and began rhythmically dipping into the water with it and thrusting it back.

Dim gray murkiness was all that remained of daylight when they reached the Jersey shore of the Hudson at a point which Lauri said brought them quite close to the tribe of Wehawk.

"You don't understand," Severing said. "I've got to return to my own people. I've got to tell them what I've found. That the radiation is gone but has produced monsters where it had lingered longest in New York. That other people—not monsters—managed to survive. That—"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Come with me."

"I'm sorry, Lauri. But you see—"

"Any girl of the Wehawk

would do as much for her sisters and cousins."

"I would rather we part friends, but if we must part enemies—"

"We are not parting, Curtiss. Do you know the way back to your tribe in the darkness, to wherever you came from?"

"Well, no."

"Do you know exactly where on the river we have landed?"

"No-o."

"Do you know how to survive at night in freezing temperature? You'll have to if you don't come to Wehawk, which is but an hour's walk over those hills."

Severing said nothing for a while. He had to admit the girl knew what she was talking about. Probably, it would be suicide for him to wander off alone. There would be no harm in spending the night with her tribe. He said finally, "All right, Lauri. But only this one night. Eventually my people and yours will get together, but I have a lot of work to do first."

"Then you'll come with me peacefully?"

When Severing nodded, he became aware of Lauri sheathing her knife with a little sigh of relief.

Then, together, they set out

through the fading light. It was still cold. It was colder. But Severing was too numb to feel it, too numb to do anything but force one foot out in front of the other and stagger along blindly, hoping that Lauri could find her way. It didn't seem possible to him in the cold and darkness, but her sense of direction proved unerring.

An hour later, they reached Wehawk. Severing remembered vaguely that he staggered inside a large building with Lauri. It might have been the Weehawken City Hall at one time, but now it was home for the tribe of Wehawk, with their meeting places and public rooms and trading centers on the main floor, their living quarters on the floors above. A primitive tribe—paradoxically in the remote future and using an ancient city hall more like a hotel than a tribal village. If the boys on Madison Avenue could only see it. . . .

"Hey!" Lauri's voice. "I found a man."

"A man?"

"A real man?"

"Let me see! Hey! Stop pushing."

"I heard her first. Where, Lauri?"

"Hey, girls! A man. Lauri's got a man."

And a male voice, from upstairs, gruff and angry: "Shut the hell up down there and let me get some sleep!"

"A man," Lauri said. "He's good-looking, too."

"I don't care if he looks like one of the N'Yawk caterpillars. A man. . . ."

And the avalanche of females, in various stages of undress, came tumbling down the several staircases which led to the central meeting room of the Wehawk tribe.

Helpless, Severing fell before the avalanche.

"The poor thing. He's freezing."

"He needs some hot soup."

"A good massage."

"Some hot soup."

"I said, a good massage."

Severing got his good massage. Severing got his hot drink, his hot soup, his spiked drink, his hot bath, his warm clothing, his seven course dinner, his share of pinches and pats and winks and stares and promises and . . .

"Let him alone now," said Lauri. "I know how he feels. I can hardly stand up, either."

"We are a hundred and seventy women," one of Lauri's sisters or cousins said. "And five men, only two of whom are of any good to us now."

"I resent that!" a quavering old male voice said.

"You get on back to bed, grandpaw," one of the Wehawk girls said. Severing heard the old man grumbling as he wandered off.

"Here's another man, Lauri. A young man. Look at him. *Look* at him! He's too important. We can't sleep on it. We can't let it go until morning. We wouldn't get any sleep, anyhow. I know, I wouldn't."

There was general agreement on that. Severing hardly cared. He only wanted to get to sleep. He felt gorged on all the food they had given him, bloated with all the drink—and tired, so tired. He was sitting in the middle of a great circle of women now, their legs ruddy with firelight. He began to crawl off slowly, to find a dark corner somewhere and let them discuss his fate without him; let them tell him in the morning, let them marry him to every girl in the place or to none of them or to one at a time or anything, as long as he could get his sleep tonight. . . .

"Hold on, there! He's trying to get away."

"Where? Where!"

"Stop him!"

Hands which were at once gentle and rough grabbed

Severing. He was returned to the center of the circle. He sat there, leaning back against a wall of knees. He kept on thinking of the boys on Madison Avenue. If they could only see him now. He was easily the most popular man to hit the Greater New York area since Valentino. If he wished, he could be master of the biggest harem this side of the Persian Gulf. If he wished . . . But as he listened, he realized he wouldn't have much to say about it.

"Share and share alike, I always say!"

"But we've got a democratic tribe here. He's got to be allowed to make free choices."

"During the day, we'll worry about free choices. At night, at night . . ."

There was a murmur of assent.

"How do we decide on the order of sharing?"

"Does the *Amazing* say anything about it? It hasn't failed us yet."

Severing was next aware of a dog-eared copy of a pocket-sized magazine being passed around. This, through an accident, was the bible of the Wehawk women, their sole surviving book. It was a link with the unknown past; for

them, a bridge across sundered history.

"Nothing," a girl's voice said. "I know the *Amazing* by heart. There is nothing about sharing a man. There is nothing about a surplus of women."

"In the section called REVOLT OF THE AMAZONS, women rule the world and—"

"That doesn't matter. There are plenty of men to go around."

"In the section called STAR OF UNTRUTH—"

"Never mind. Share and share alike, and so be it. But how do we begin?"

"Lemmegoangetsomesleep." Severing mumbled drowsily. "Tomorrowsanothuhday."

"The poor thing. He's so tired."

"Let me at him for five minutes, he'll be awakened."

"Keep back! We haven't decided."

"It seems obvious to me," an older woman's voice said, "that since Lauri found the man, Lauri should be given the first share. After that, we can work it alphabetically."

"Alphabetically!" shrieked a younger voice. "I'm Wendi. Wendi!"

It was generally agreed, though, that Lauri be given the first share. All the girls

oo'd and ah'd as Lauri, as tired as Severing himself, staggered upstairs with him. They had to support each other beyond the first landing, with the anxious jabbering voices fading slowly behind them.

"I should have warned you," Lauri said ten minutes later as they sat in her small room on the third floor of the Wehawk tribal building. "They were bound to be like that."

Severing hardly heard her. "Brother, am I exhausted," he said. This, he thought drowsily, the boys on Madison Avenue would never believe. Severing in his harem, and wanting only to sleep while a whole tribe of females clamored for him.

"This sharing business—" Lauri began.

"What about it?" Time enough for him to tell her tomorrow he had other ideas.

"I—I don't approve. I realize it's for the good of the tribe, but—"

"Go ahead."

"I'd rather wait and have the decision given by — well—"

"Umm?"

"By you, yourself, Curt-iss! That's what. Curtis, Curt-iss, are you listening?"

"Umm-mm . . ."

"I was saying, if you're given the run of the tribe . . . yawn . . . and then allowed to . . . yawn . . . and after . . . yawn . . . ummm-mm."

Downstairs, the eager tribeswomen sang hymeneal songs. Upstairs, Severing and Lauri slept like logs.

Severing awoke with a hand shaking his shoulder. He had been dreaming of the 20th century. He wondered how long it would take before such dreams stopped. "Is it morning already, Lauri?" asked Severing as he opened his eyes.

It wasn't Lauri. A man stood there, big and well-muscled but given to fat. "I'm Pawl," he said. "I'm looking for my sister."

Severing sat up shrugging. "I haven't seen her."

"But you came up here with her—"

"Haven't seen her since last night, I mean."

"Say, wait a minute," said Pawl in a surly voice. "Are you a magician? We know all about magicians from the *Amazing*."

"No, I'm not a magician."

"You come from the place of noises—"

"I don't care if I come from the other side of the moon.

I ought to know if I'm a magician or not."

"Where is Lauri?"

Pawl had a one track mind, Severing thought. Lauri had probably gone off for a stroll somewhere or to get breakfast or wherever Wehawk women went of a snowy morning. "The reason I ask," Pawl said, "is because I heard some bad talk."

"What kind of bad talk?"

"About Lauri. It was the twins, Milli and Salli. My sister had a head start, they said. She already knew you. It wasn't fair. You'd always be thinking of my sister. Where would that leave the others? Milli and Salli are very democratic. They're always talking about 'the others' but thinking about Milli and Salli. Do you think my sister has already been abducted?"

"I didn't hear anything last night. But," Severing admitted, "I was dead to the world."

"We'll have to find her. We can cover more ground if we separate, so I will start at the bottom and . . ."

It was the least he could do, Severing thought. He was anxious to get started for the crypt, but if something had happened to Lauri after what they'd been through together,

it was his duty to help if he could. Duty? Severing thought as Pawl explained the virtues of one of them beginning on the basement level of the building and one at the top. Duty—or something else much stronger?

“—of the building. All right,” Severing watched the big man head down the hall toward the stairs, then began padding toward the far end of the hall. He was invited in for breakfast and entertainment eight times along the way, as doors opened and closed on his path. Then:

“Psst!”

“No, I don’t want breakfast and—”

“Breakfast, nothing. I want to talk with you. I’m Salli.”

Severing whirled. The door was open a crack. Severing pushed it the rest of the way and saw a big, pug-nosed blonde standing there in a kind of nightshirt a size too small for her. Severing asked, “Where is she?”

“Who, my sister?”

“It’s for the good of everyone,” Salli said, which told Severing nothing. “Lauri has already had her chance. She ought to miss a few turns. Incidentally, what are you doing this morning, Curt-iss?”

“You better get the girls together,” Severing said.

“There’s been a misunderstanding.”

“I’m sure that you and I, together, can straighten things out, and—”

“The girls,” Severing said wearily. He thought: too much of even a good thing . . .

Fifteen minutes later, he was speaking to an assembly of the Wehawk clan.

“This morning,” Severing began, “someone kidnaped Lauri, Pawl’s sister. Last night, all of you made some assumptions because I was too tired to argue. Well, listen. I’m not going to be shared by any group of—“Man-starved dames, Severing was going to say. “—Of women. I’m not . . .”

He didn’t get any further. Apparently his views on the subject were not wanted. There were shouts off:

“He has no right to talk like that!”

“A typical male. Selfish, conceited, trying to take advantage.”

“Why listen to any more of it? He’s outnumbered. We ought to show him who’s boss of the Wehawk.”

Almost two hundred frustrated females, thought Severing uneasily. If they gave him a few minutes to talk, everything would be all right. But

they weren't going to give him a few minutes. They were shouting and shaking their fists and in one way Severing was still the most popular thing to hit Wehawk in a long time but in another way could wind up being the object of a lynching if he didn't watch his step.

"All I want to know is, where's Lauri?" he roared.

They roared back, a shrieking torrent of sound. Severing would find out nothing from them. They advanced upon him, each with her own idea about how to teach Severing a lesson or how not to teach him a lesson or how to orient him to his new role in the new society or how not to orient him because you should let nature take its course.

Severing fled.

He found himself once more on the top floor of the building. Every few seconds he had to dart into a doorway and flatten himself there as a pair of girls rushed by, looking for him. They were hunting in pairs and they knew the inside of their tribal building much better than Severing did. It was only a matter of time until they found him, he realized, but maybe he could find Lauri first.

It was dim at this end of the corridor. Here there were no windows in the wall, but closed doors. Severing got by the first one but the second one swung suddenly open and an arm darted out, yanking Severing into the room. It was the big, pug-nosed blonde.

"You're Salli," Severing said.

"Milli."

"Where's your sister? Where's Lauri?"

"Inside. You needn't worry about being kicked around any longer, Curt-iss. It has been decided what will be done with you."

"Yes?" said Severing. "Who decided what?"

"My sister and I decided we'll go away with you somewhere and start a new tribe, just the three of us."

Severing could think of no one he'd less rather start a new tribe with than the big blonde twins. He said, "Uh, that's very nice. Did you say Lauri was inside?"

"Yes. Come, if you want to say goodbye to her."

Their behavior was irrational to the point of disbelief, Severing thought. If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, heard it with his ears. . . . But irrational only out of context, he told himself. If you take a hundred and sev-

enty-five starving men and put them in a room with food, a little food, not enough to go around, their behavior might also seem irrational.

Milli stood on one side of Lauri. Salli stood on the other. Lauri's arms were fettered behind her back but it hardly seemed necessary because Milli and Salli seemed much bigger than she was.

"Curt-iss! I was worried about you."

"From now on he's going to get the best of care," Salli assured her captive.

"From Salli and me," Milli said. "I'm so excited. Are you ready, Curt-iss?"

"I'm not going with you," Severing said, and watched as they began first to pout, then to look confused, then to look angry.

"You've cast a spell on him," one of the blonde girls accused Lauri.

Spells and black magic, Severing thought. There must have been a story dealing with those subjects in the *Amazing*. An anthropologist would have a field day here, studying a society based upon the fictional contents of a magazine. Well, perhaps there was an anthropologist among the five-hundred. Severing did not know. The group had been gathered together quickly in

the final days of the war, with no regard to age, occupation, sex, or anything else.

"That's crazy," said Lauri indignantly. "Just because he prefers me doesn't mean I cast a spell on him."

The blonde girls were all keyed up. The situation might be dangerous for Lauri. And dangerous or not, Severing wouldn't be able to get away unless the buxom twins could be distracted.

"Who says anything about preferring you?" Severing said.

"But—"

"You see?" one of the twins cried triumphantly. "You see?"

"I prefer," Severing said in a matter-of-fact voice, "one of the twins. But I don't like the other one at all."

"After all we've been through," Lauri protested heatedly.

But Severing was watching the twins who were regarding each other incredulously.

"You," said Salli.

"You," said Milli.

"My own sister. My flesh and blood."

"Not willing to share with me. Trying to take Curt-iss away."

"Winning him over behind my back."

"Throwing yourself at him shamelessly."

"You—you B.e.m!"

They were identical twins. Severing couldn't tell them apart. Severing didn't know which one swung first, but in another moment they were going at it fast and furiously, fist and foot and tooth and nail.

"I'll make you so ugly, he won't want to look at you."

"You're that ugly already," the other retorted.

They wrestled each other to the floor and went on fighting. "Now you won't have either one of them," Lauri told Severing. She sounded happy.

"Who the hell wants either one of them?" Severing whispered. "Let's get out of here."

"You mean . . . you mean it's me you want?"

"I only mean I want to get out of here before I start having nightmares about your whole darned sex."

The twins were a flailing tangle of writhing, kicking, punching limbs when Severing took Lauri's hand and slipped out of the room. A woman saw them in the hallway and started yelling. More women came running. With Lauri, Severing bolted for the stairway. It wouldn't take much more to make him a misogynist, he thought grimly.

"There he is!" a woman's voice yelled.

"After him!"

"He's trying to get away."

"Once we get hold of him this time, he won't get away again. We'll post a twenty-four hour guard over him."

Probably, they would. It would have been funny—if harrowing—but it could be tragic, too, Severing thought. Civilization was waiting to be reborn. All Severing had to do was return to the crypt and activate the mechanism which would bring his people out of suspended animation. If they caught him, though, he might never have the chance.

A red-haired girl blocked the head of the stairs. Severing tried to sidestep her, but she got her arms around his waist and held on. She was hollering and Severing could hear pounding footsteps, shouting voices. He wrenched her arms loose. She wrapped them around his legs. He started down the stairs, dragging her with him.

"Kick her teeth in!" shouted Lauri. In the 20th Century, Severing realized, the chase was more subtle, but essentially the same. And if there were close to fifty women for every man . . .

Severing tripped, tumbled

downstairs with the redhead, who still clung to him. Severing rolled clear at the landing. Lauri leaped down after him, calling the redhead nasty names.

Pawl stood at the foot of the stairs. "You can't run away," he boomed, "even if you are taking my sister. You have your duty to our women."

Severing couldn't fight with the women. He could only hope to elude them. But Pawl was different. He was almost grateful for Pawl's intervention. He met the big man on the run and brought his right fist up from below his knees. Severing felt the contact clear down to his shoulder, but kept running. Pawl collapsed in a loose-jointed fall.

"Pawl's hurt."

"Poor Pawl."

"There now, there—"

They clustered about him. If they didn't give the unconscious man some air, Severing thought, they might kill him with kindness. But it gave Severing a reprieve. With Lauri he plunged on downstairs and raced quickly outside.

Five minutes later, they were climbing the hills north of Wehawk. Severing could hear the sounds of pursuit, muted by the soft-falling

snow. "Think we'll shake them?" he asked Lauri.

"Shake them?"

"Think we'll be able to get away?"

"We'd better, Curt-iss. You don't understand."

"What don't I understand?" asked Severing, who had paused with Lauri to catch his breath.

"As long as we were in Wehawk, they only wanted to stop you, so they could—well—"

"I know, share me."

"Yes. But now that we have left Wehawk and are still fleeing—"

Lauri never finished the sentence. Something whizzed through the air inches from Severing's head and came to rest, vibrating, in a tree trunk. Severing gaped. It was an arrow. Half its length had disappeared into the tree.

"Are they crazy?" squawked Severing.

"That is what I tried to tell you. Now that we left Wehawk together, we are fugitives. We have committed the one deadly crime, the flight of a man with one woman. You see, with the shortage of men—"

"You mean, they don't want me any longer?"

"They now want to kill you."

Another arrow thrummed by. Severing shuddered. It was snowing and cold and they didn't have the chance to get warm clothing. Severing was still wearing the remains of his gray flannel trousers.

"Let's get the hell out of here," he said, and took Lauri's hand and started running.

Ordinarily, the law among the Wehawk women probably served as an injunction which kept the few eligible males in line, assuring the greatest number of progeny possible, but now it might sound the death-knell of civilization. If they caught Severing and killed him, the five-hundred in their silent crypt would go on sleeping their sleep of the dead while the Earth swung yearly in its orbit around the sun and the sun followed its path around the hub of the galaxy — forever, Severing thought in despair.

A third arrow narrowly missed Lauri. Together, they ran.

The snow blinded them, but also blinded their pursuers. They had been climbing steadily for hours, groggy, numb with cold. They could double back and slip through gorges and across frozen river beds.

It wouldn't matter. Everywhere they went, the snow received their footprints and held them, stark and clear, for the others to follow.

"I don't know the exact location of your—your crypt," Lauri panted. "The sounds used to come from certain hills, and now have stopped."

"Just take me in the general direction. I'll find it."

The fleetest of their pursuers, half a dozen girls dressed for the snow in furs and cured leather boots, were closing the gap. Not a quarter of a mile behind, they came swiftly, tirelessly through the snow. Occasionally one of them would loose an arrow in their quarry's direction, but Severing and Lauri were moving figures, difficult to hit.

"They're going to catch us before we go much further," Lauri said.

"The fools!" Severing said. "The fools! If only they'd give me time—"

"Time for what?"

"Can't explain now," cried Severing over his shoulder, sprinting ahead. Lauri overtook him. The half dozen figures were closer. Severing could hear their shrill voices as they shouted encouragement to one another. An arrow tore at Severing's trousers, stuck there, below the

knee. An inch closer and his flight would have ended. He grabbed the haft, yanked the arrow out, tossed it aside. How much of a lead did they have now? Two hundred yards?

"Faster!" Severing pleaded.

"But this is the spot. It is around here. I can take you no further."

Severing's vision blurred. The hills, the rocks, the trees, mantled with snow. Was it this hillock? Or this one, or . . .

An arrow almost parted his hair. Lauri screamed.

Over there—it had to be over there. Desperately, Severing made his way through the snow, groped at the rock beneath it with his freezing hands. The rock groaned, swung aside.

"Inside!" Severing roared, and started sprinting again.

Lauri followed him into the warm darkness. The stone began to grate shut. Severing looked back, once, to the bright mouth of the cave. The six figures slipped inside before the stone portal could bar the way.

It was dark, Severing thought. Too dark for arrows. But too dark to see what he was doing. There were light switches on the wall, of

course. If Severing turned them on, he'd be inviting death. He groped his way along in the darkness. The footsteps were very close behind them.

Something collided with Severing from the rear. "Lauri?" he whispered.

"Here they are!" a girl yelled.

Hands grabbed Severing in the darkness. He struggled, was dragged to the floor. He heard Lauri shouting. He kicked and lashed out with his hands and tore himself loose. He stood up, staggered to the wall. He couldn't find what he had to in the darkness. He had to take the chance. His fingers, still numb with cold, groped for the light switches along the wall, found them.

Bright flourescents lined the underground corridor. Severing plunged on, not looking back for Lauri now. There was no time. She was glib enough, that girl. She could save her skin by telling them Severing had made her flee with him, a prisoner. She could—

A hail of arrows greeting Severing. He rounded a turn in the corridor and was momentarily clear of them. Was he lost? Had he somehow gone the wrong way?

The corridor turned again—and opened on an immense underground cavern. The crypt.

Severing found the controls, activated them. The Wehawk girls rushed into the cavern.

"I surrender!" Severing called. "You can take me back for execution." He needed exactly two minutes, and didn't want an arrow to end his life first.

"Execution, what's that? We simply follow a criminal and kill him—" Bow was raised to trim shoulder, bow string drawn back.

Severing found smething heavy and hurled it. He turned and ran, darting in and out the rows of coffins with the lids that could be opened from the inside. He tripped, held his breath, heard them rush down the next aisle. He waited. Soon . . . soon . . .

"There he is!"

And then the coffins began to open. Men and women stepped forth. The Wehawk girls let their arms fall to their sides in astonishment. Men and women.

But mostly men.

The Wehawk girls gawked, looked at one another, began

to smile. Severing wasn't going to be slain now. Severing would be a tribal hero.

"That's what I needed time for," Severing told Lauri later. "To get back to the crypt. To open it. We had the tailor-made answer to your problem. Our five hundred came together hastily. There was no time for selection. Three hundred and fifty are men."

"Then . . . then we have enough to go around."

"You're darned tootin'," said Severing happily.

Lauri snuggled next to him. "I still choose you," she said.

Severing pushed her away, but smiled. "Young lady, you're not going to choose anyone. In the first place, that's not the way it's done. In the second place, I don't care if I never see another female again. Ever, see?"

"Curt-iss?"

"Well, for a week or so, anyhow." And Severing winked at Lauri.

"There was a whole world to explore, a civilization to rebuild, and a girl to marry. First, though, Severing wanted a good, old-fashioned bachelor vacation.

THE END

THE PSIONIC MOUSETRAP

By MURRAY LEINSTER

In the frozen wastes of Siberia was a lonely village of ignorant peasants. What possible interest could the heads of American security have in placing an agent inside its borders?

THE first sign of a radar-beam came when they were still at forty-five thousand feet, under the parachute that had been designed to stop a jet-bomber on a short runway. Gordon was looking grimly at the stars, then, sucking at his oxygen-tube and thinking ironically of his mission and that of the man with him.

He didn't know who the other man was, of course. They'd been blindfolded in the plane that dropped them so that neither could give a description of the other if things went wrong. Gordon wondered sardonically what his companion's especial fitness was. His, of course, was that he knew Woodbury—and Woodbury's work besides. He could not be fooled. If there should

happen to be any psionic developments below, he'd recognize them for what they were, and that would help him in dealing with them. Also, Woodbury was a close personal friend. They'd worked together for years—even in some of Woodbury's more elementary research in psionics. Gordon could be absolutely certain that it was Woodbury that he killed or gave the means of suicide to IF he was lucky enough to get at him.

But a radar-beam hit the men under the parachute while they were still forty-five thousand feet high. There, half the cosmos was bright stars in a background of utter darkness. The other half, below, was blackness which was this part of Siberia. The plane

that had dumped them was no longer even a faint bluish rocket-discharge fleeing through the constellations. There was nothing anywhere but the stars and the darkness and the two men, absurdly and monstrously muffled, swinging beneath the great black chute.

The other man tugged clumsily at the arm of Gordon's altitude-suit. Gordon squirmed around and looked. The small face of a hand-size radar-alarm glowed briefly, and faded, and glowed briefly again. A revolving radar beam, somewhere below, undoubtedly reporting their existence as a bright blip on a faintly luminescent plate. It was telling the operator that an object was descending from the skies.

Gordon said nothing. At forty-five thousand feet there is no point in conversation. One needs to keep busy sucking oxygen to stay alive. If a radar-beam was on them, obviously staying alive was not going to be especially likely. Presently there'd be shells arching up from the nothingness below, and proximity fuses would make quite sure that anything descending from the frozen heights was blasted to bits. Woodbury would be very much disap-

pointed if his captors told him afterward about men who had come to kill him, and had been killed first. He might weep bitterly in his disappointment. Gordon felt very sorry for Woodbury.

But nothing happened—yet. At forty thousand feet, the other man showed Gordon the radar-alarm dial again. A second beam had joined the first. Now two revolving radars scanned them. The flashes were unequally bright, and they had not quite the same period, but there was no longer any possibility that the two men might land unnoticed. It might be that presently a wing of jet-planes would come streaking through darkness to set off flares and examine them to make sure that this was a spy-drop and not a bombing. The dropping of an H-bomb would be an economy if it killed Woodbury. So the planes might come to see if that was the idea. This part of Siberia was almost empty. There were a few log villages and a few dirt roads, but there were no cities or military installations visible to the cameras of the robojets which came over at high altitude to do aerial mapping, and of which one in six got back. A hellbomb



"Tell us the machine's purpose," the officer said. "Otherwise——"

could be dropped here without starting a war.

At thirty-five thousand feet the radar-alarm glowed with a new signal. The two series of flashes continued, but the whole dial-face now glowed continuously with a swiftly flickering half-light. This simply could not be anything but a radar gun-sight, laying anti-aircraft guns on the spot where their shells would meet the descending chute. Gordon felt himself wincing as he waited for the flashes which he might perceive when the shells burst, and before he ceased to perceive anything.

Still, no shells came. Two scanning radars and a gun-sight on them. Two men, thirty thousand feet above the earth, swinging underneath the stars. They had little more privacy than the proverbial goldfish. Radar wouldn't tell that there were two men instead of one, but it told enough.

At eighteen thousand feet, Gordon removed the oxygen-tube from his mouth, opened the gas-release so the plastic tank would empty itself, and then pressed the destruction-stud and dropped it. The other man was similarly occupied. Gordon saw the flares as the tanks consumed themselves

like miniature shooting stars above the cloud-banks. Weather had predicted a heavy overcast for this area.

The other man began to wriggle out of his altitude suit. Gordon duplicated the feat. They were, then, very absurdly dressed like Siberian peasants. They even smelled like Siberian peasants—at least Gordon did—and they had carefully been supplied with individual fauna suitable to their roles. Gordon had also been treated with a skin-anaesthetic so that he would not itch intolerably. He would scratch, but only absently. He would not have to remember how much to scratch and how much to endure.

The stars vanished, overhead. The men had reached the top of the cloud-bank. They would not know how many layers of mist lay between them and undoubtedly now-alerted watchers on the ground. Gordon said:

"I don't like the way things are going. We ought to be dead." He thought grimly of what might have been developed below if the Russians had really succeeded in picking Woodbury's brain. He added coldly: "We may be just dropping into a bigger and better mousetrap."

The simile of a better mousetrap was quite inadequate, of course. The science of psionics was bound to make as much difference in human culture—and war—as the discovery of fire or metals. Woodbury, presumably down below, knew more about it than any other man alive. He almost *was* the science of psionics. The Russians might have anything from the controlled delivery of unlimited power from substance, to teleportation and even less guessable things. It depended on what they'd gotten from Woodbury and what they'd done with it.

The other man under the parachute grunted. "Ready."

Gordon said: "Three, two, one—Geronimo!"

He pulled the release-cord. They dropped like stones. The big chute behind them whipped away. There was no metal on it—not even buckles. In the thick cloud-stuff through which the two men dropped, the left-behind parachute thrashed wildly when its burden dropped away. Then its igniters took effect. The chute and its cords and the altitude-suits destroyed themselves by fire in the thickness of the clouds. Only fine ash would descend, and that would be

scattered over leagues of ground. There would be no clues dropped to earth for men on the ground to interpret.

It was a one-man parachute that checked the dizzy plunge of the two men, later. They did not know whether they were still in the cloud-banks or not. They could see absolutely nothing. They were belted together and the other man swung the radar-alarm into view again and said curtly:

"The guns are to northward. We seem to be spinning a little."

Clinging close, their bodies tightly fastened into one object, they descended much too swiftly. Gordon worked the shrouds, with his eyes on a tiny, luminous-needle compass. He checked the twisting. Then he hauled fiercely to spill air. He definitely did not feel easier because they were not shot down.

They saw headlights below. Robojet planes had photographed all this area without finding any trace of motor vehicles or gun emplacements. But the radar gunsight proved that there were antiaircraft weapons. Now headlights proved that there was motorized equipment, too. Underground, camouflaged installa-

tions might conceal any number of men. Apparently, they did.

But danger from such things could be accepted calmly. Gordon was concerned with much more deadly things. The deadliness came in part because they couldn't be anticipated. With Woodbury carrying most of his specialized knowledge in his head, and nobody knowing what could be done with it, anybody could develop cold chills merely by making guesses.

The sky was black. The ground was black. The only visible things anywhere in the cosmos were the headlights of a dozen trucks—vehicles, anyhow—bumbling swiftly toward the spot where they ought to land.

But the spilled air from the side of the chute changed that place. When the two men saw vague variations in the intensity of the darkness below them, they were off the line of the vehicles' approach. Gordon held the shrouds recklessly tight. Air spilled, and they dropped at a slant. . . .

He released the shrouds just in time. The chute jerked at their bodies, and they swayed crazily, and a moment later there was a thrashing of brushwood and they hit

solidity with a force to knock the breath from them.

The nearest truck was still almost a mile away. They hauled in frantically on the chute. It was designed to be readily hidden. Gordon found the knotted rope, and pulled on it, and the chute fell apart into ribbons which followed the shrouds to his hands and were almost instantly bundled into a mass which could be carried.

The two men fled at right angles to the trucks' course. They must separate very soon, but first they fled, and found themselves rushing from the very edge of merely thick brushwood into a forest. Gordon, himself, crashed into a fallen tree-trunk and gasped the news. His companion instantly halted. They felt along the trunk until they found the upended mass of roots. They thrust the chute deeply under it, and piled wetted leaves—there had been much rain—on top. Then Gordon cracked one of the igniter-capsules. He panted:

"Luck!"

The other man grunted and fled into the blackness. The chute had to be destroyed lest some development of psionics make it a means for the destruction of the men who had

landed by it. Gordon headed toward the place where the trucks were stopping. He and the other man would invariably use differing tactics to avoid capture. Gordon, approaching those who hunted for him, saw a faint glare where the headlights were accumulating. He could see tree-trunks and branches by the light. Behind him, the parachute quietly destroyed itself. The other man thrashed away into the distance.

Gordon heard dogs. He was relieved. At least they had nothing of Woodbury's development that would be better than dogs! But the non-psionic science which had discovered shark-repellant for airmen downed at sea had been able—with a little more trouble—to discover a dog-repellant that had no smell to men. Dogs would not trail the two parachutists. Gordon — not knowing what to fear — had feared something more certain.

It was when, for a bare instant, dogs and men alike were silent after the last truck had stopped, that Gordon heard the sound of piston-engines in the sky. Then he swore, though still he was relieved that only such normal, non-psionic methods were in use. That buzzing sound would

be a helicopter, searching with a really modern snooper-scope for the warmth of a man's body in the night below. Rain would have helped a great deal, just then.

But it did not come. Gordon found a huge tree. He saw the thickness of its foliage by the barely perceptible glow of the truck-lights. He trampled here and there until he found a wind-drift of fallen, wetted, rotten leaves. He crawled under their unbroken surface. Just before his head was covered, he saw the headlights flick off one by one. Then there were lesser, whiter flickerings. The soldiers were scattering to hunt in the blackness with dogs—which would be useless—and with flashlight beams on their weapons. If they sighted a man and centered him in their light-beams, they would have only to pull trigger to end his fleeing. And there was the increasing, droning sound of the helicopter, coming to search from the sky.

Gordon lay still under the leaves, which might with the foliage conceal his body-heat from the scanner up aloft. He heard the search as it proceeded. He heard the helicopter, droning in circles a thousand feet overhead.

After half an hour, he heard

the noises when the other man was killed.

When dawn came, Gordon was hidden in the village from which the motor-trucks had come. He'd trailed them back to it, and they hadn't suspected. The achievement was incredible, considering what he had worried about. But the village was incredible, too. At sunrise he was hidden atop the plank ceiling of a long structure in the village itself. He was up underneath its thatched roof, and he could peer out through crevices in the logs of which the peasant-type house was built. He'd gotten to this hut after finding out several astonishing but reasonable facts about the other log houses. They had been modified remarkably, but this was still unchanged from the time when peasants had lived in it. It would probably be made into something else eventually.

The first gray light of morning shone in the village's single street. There was a small-sized horde of featureless human figures there. They worked hastily. As the light grew stronger they gathered tightly together and vanished into a tumble-down structure which once had contained a brick stove, which doubled as

a bedstead in cold weather, and the other primitive furnishings of a Siberian peasant's home. Those furnishings were certainly gone now, because at least two hundred men had filed into the hut, though it could not possibly hold fifty. The men had worn uniforms. They had worked on the mud of the street. When the light was strong enough, Gordon could see their work. They had removed every trace of tire-tracks from the highway.

What few human figures remained in view when gray dawn really broke were not in uniform. They wore the shapeless peasant-costume of this area. Some wore shawls and voluminous skirts. Some of those shawled and skirted figures wore moustaches or beards.

Gordon had been prepared for the unprecedented. This was no more than preposterous. He understood this. After daybreak, the slowly moving visible figures would not deceive anybody on the ground, of course, but from overhead—to, say, a robojet taking pictures from high aloft—the village would look exactly like any other squalid, straggling, unsanitary settlement of this region. Only Gordon could see the inconsistencies.

The largest hut in the village was the one into which the returned trucks had been driven the night before. It might hold two of them. A dozen had rumbled into it. Its entire front was fitted with gigantic hinges, and opened out like a door. There was another dingy structure, and Gordon could see through a narrow window and observe electric lights burning inside. There should be, of course, no electric-light plants within hundreds of miles. He saw a figure on the street. It wore the incredible garments suitable to an inhabitant of such a place, but it lighted a cigarette with an automatic lighter. A lighter would cost a sum equal to a year's income for a Siberian peasant. Through the open doorway of another building he saw a uniformed man briskly operating a typewriter.

Presently an ox-cart came plodding into the village and stopped before one of its fifteen houses. An hour later, the ox-cart plodded slowly and heavily away again. In every respect that could be detected from overhead, the village appeared to support only the activities of a population of fifty or sixty souls. But there had been at least two hundred men working on the street before

daybreak, and Gordon grimly surmised garages and mechanics and fuel-stores for the trucks, and a battery of anti-aircraft guns and men and supplies and ammunition for them, and there must have been a communications center and headquarters and the lavish number of men the Russians used for all purposes, and probably a commissariat. There had to be to take care of what obviously was here.

But no sign—yet—of what the Pentagon had most feared.

Not less than five hundred men were hidden and maintained within sight of Gordon's hiding-place. The odds were better that there were five thousand. The house whose front swung open was, of course, the cover for a ramp letting the trucks go underground. The smaller hut into which two hundred men had crowded was obviously the cover of a stair-head leading to subterranean shelters. The houses with electric lights inside, with uniformed men operating typewriters and such modern devices, must also communicate with artificial caverns under the seemingly undisturbed surface earth. There must be corridors and mess-halls and barracks, and storage-rooms and the necessary accommodations for a

garrison in the thousands. And there was the installation the men and guns were present to protect.

It was a place that had to be hidden so painstakingly and so carefully that the Russians were willing to place it hundreds of miles from any place of known civilization, and with vast inconvenience supply it by hidden means, and garrison it with hundreds or thousands of men.

There was only one place where this particular sort of remoteness and secrecy was required.

It could not be anything but the place to which those "fugitives" from capitalism — about which the Soviets boasted so loudly—were sheltered and interrogated and their brains carefully rinsed of every trace of information the Russians considered important. This was the place where the Russians expected to win the next war. Gordon had been prepared to learn that it was already won. He'd been sent as a last resort to make them lose it. That, succinctly, was that.

He waited very patiently, watching from his hiding-place. He considered that to all intents and purposes he was as dead as if his throat

had been cut two weeks ago. But he hoped intensely that when he was literally killed it would be quickly, and after he'd killed Woodbury, or else that he'd have a chance to dislodge that special tooth-cap which would arrange a sudden demise for him. Even leaving Woodbury and his mission aside, Gordon did not want the Russians to announce that another key figure in the "decadent, capitalist-warmongering American system of enslaved scientists" had asked for asylum in the USSR. He did not want them to announce that he—Gordon—was fully cooperative and giving all the information he possessed about the capitalistic spy-networks in Russia. Most of all, he did not want to help the Russians develop that science of psionics which was in a primitive state even in America—because Woodbury was lost—but which promised such tremendous ultimate results. He did not believe that he could be made to help in psionic research. He was convinced that the creative function of his brain would be destroyed if his will broke and he was turned into a half-mad robot hysterically obsessed with a need to obey his Russian captors. He would much rather be killed than

run the risk of being mistaken about that!

He had, if humanly possible, or even if not, to kill his former friend and colleague Woodbury, who had "escaped" to asylum in the Soviet Union. Woodbury had to be killed because he knew too much that other American scientists did not fully understand, and the Russians might get it out of him. Gordon had to be the man to kill him, because Gordon might conceivably be able to turn the results of Woodbury's work against him. Nobody else was so likely to be capable of that trick.

Woodbury's "flight" to Russia was not exactly voluntary. When he was missed, the door of his bedroom had been broken down, and he had killed two still-unidentified persons who seemed to have come to help him flee. He had been heard shouting for help as he was carried off. All of which was typical of similar flights of other Americans to Russia. Very few competent scientists risked going anywhere alone, these days, for fear of finding themselves in flight from their native land. Some had been killed while resisting the urge to flee. The urge usually consisted of grim figures with automatic pistols who had cars or planes ready to carry

out the flight, and who would shoot down anybody including the fugitives if they were resisted.

In short, kidnapping had become a recognized technique in the cold war. The Russians seemed to believe it would solve the problem of making a hot war successful.

In the case of Woodbury, there was a grisly chance that they might be right. It was he who had found those first, obscure linkages between the fact of mind and the behavior of matter. He was fumbling at practical application of psionic forces which previously had been treated only in highly speculative writings. The Russians hadn't kidnapped him for that, but as a top-rank physicist. And they had brain-washed him and reconditioned his mind and now they were trying to make it work for them. Gordon believed that they couldn't tame his intellect without mutilating it, but even Woodbury's crippled intellect would be too good to let the Russians have. If he were anywhere, it should be here. If he were here it was worth any conceivable risk to deny his possible achievements to the USSR. Gordon's job was to try to attend to that matter before he was killed.

Though there were no signs so far that the Russians had gotten any unprecedented devices from their captive, it became very evident during that long morning that Gordon's assignment was humanly impossible. The protection of this place was simply too good. Gordon couldn't even send back word of the nature of the defenses, so that later men might be better equipped to crash them. Literally the only thing Gordon could do would be to try to slip into the rabbit-warrens underground and somehow try blindly to find Woodbury and die with him. The odds against success were astronomical. Gordon had simply been thrown away. All the years and hopes and training and ideals he had known were simply wasted because of a lack of information at Counter-Intelligence back in Washington. He couldn't even supply information to correct that lack! The job had been underestimated, and he was going to get killed to no purpose.

So he watched the completely artificial activities of the village for a desperately tedious long day, and made chimerical plans to take advantage of infinitely unlikely breaks if they should come.

There was nothing else to do.

Near sundown, just before the light began to fade, he turned to examine his hiding-place, to refresh his memory so he could crawl out of it without making any suspicious noises. He had finished his reexamination when he noticed something up at the very peak of the roof, under the ridge-pole. It was quite small. It was inconspicuous. The wire leading from it was very carefully concealed. But he saw it, and he recognized it.

It was a very tiny television scanner. It had been watching him ever since he crawled into this hiding-place.

It was not a psionic device, but a wholly conventional object. But Gordon flew into the sort of rage which fills a man when he knows that people who intend to kill him—or worse—have been laughing at him.

When darkness fell again, still nothing had happened. The television unit gave no sign of activity. It had no moving parts larger than electrons, so activity would not show. It could be observing him by infra-red even in the dark. And it would be typically Russian to have such spy-devices everywhere about a military installation. Every

foot of underground passages as well as all the environs of the village might be constantly surveyed by such small devices. There would be microphones, too, for eavesdropping. It would be very, very Russian. But it would be even more Russian for part of the equipment to be out of order and unrepaired.

Darkness settled down upon the village. Gordon saw blackout curtains drawn. He saw men verify that no flicker of electric light escaped into the night. And then there was the absolute uneventfulness of nighttime in a dreary Siberian village. Nothing happened. It seemed that nothing could happen. Yet somewhere nearby there were barracks and troops and anti-aircraft guns. There might be five thousand men waiting for Gordon to move. Also, Woodbury might be underground not far away.

Gordon swore very softly to himself. He crawled soundlessly to the back of this attic, which he now knew had been prepared for a hideout so that anybody who made use of it could be watched. The feeling that he had been observed from the instant of his entry into this village was at once infuriating and utterly frustrating. The flap of loose thatch by which he had en-

tered the attic had been prepared for him. When he crawled out, it could be into the waiting arms of grinning Soviet soldiers.

Against that event, Gordon reached into his thick and shapeless clothing. Maybe every move he made was watched. But maybe even the Russian spy-service hadn't worked out the use of high-explosives as textile materials. Gordon happened to be wearing, as clothing, some five pounds of dynitol. It could be detonated where it was, or it could be packed into any suitable hole for demolition-charge effect. Gordon arranged, his eyes burning, that he could blast himself and everything around him within ten yards into rather complete wreckage.

But nobody was waiting when he crawled to the ground from his hiding-place. And it might mean anything, or absolutely nothing at all. The scanner in the attic might have reported faithfully, or it could be out of operation. It was most likely that he was watched every instant by men who were amused at him. Yet he might not be watched at all.

Such uncertainty was not exactly restful.

He went across the muddy

street in the darkness. The plans he'd made before discovering the scanner were precisely as good now as they had ever been—which was probably not much. He went leisurely into the tumble-down hut that covered a stairway leading underground. A voice challenged, and then grunted:

"Hah! I thought you were an officer."

Gordon growled in reply. He smelled of long bathlessness, and it was proof that he was not an officer. Sentries in a place as elaborately guarded as this did not really suspect anybody. The precautions were too elaborate. The most a sentry feared was that he might be caught by an officer in a breach of regulations.

Gordon went down the muddy steps. There was a four-foot wide corridor below. There was a smell of dampness, of concrete, of the uncleanness of a Russian barrack. He heard snores, and knew that he passed close by some sleeping-compartment. He went on, cautiously, and smelled greasy cookery. He passed as tensely through more corridor-space, and there was a stairway leading down to a lower level, and he heard voices and laughter and Russian profanity. It was a

recreation-room for troops off-duty. It occurred to Gordon that undoubtedly that recreation-room had scanners in it, and hidden microphones.

These corridors might be equipped the same way! He had progressed for some hundreds of yards without encountering a single human being. Maybe the scanners in the corridors were the reason.

Gordon cursed himself for a fool. Of course that was it! He'd anticipated it, he'd been ready for it, he'd forgotten it! This was a mousetrap and he was a mouse. He had walked into the trap and every movement he made was watched and every sound overheard. He stopped short and ground his teeth.

Seconds later he heard footsteps approaching him. They came directly toward him, echoing hollowly between walls. There was a side-corridor opening to the left, just here. Logically, he should have dodged down that side-corridor to avoid an encounter. But he knew he was watched. Therefore, the man had been sent to cause him to dodge down that left-hand passage. They would expect to turn him deftly this way and that, to exactly the spot they wished to have him reach, and

there they would overwhelm him.

Rage rose in him. Then he did move into the side corridor. But he flattened himself against the wall, just past the junction with the original passage. He listened.

The approaching footsteps hesitated. They almost stopped. The unseen man had been warned. The scanners? The footsteps came on, purposefully.

Gordon waited until the last possible fraction of a second. Then in one motion he ducked and dived. Instead of plunging out upright, he flung himself at the man's calves.

It was singularly effective. The man was ready, but not for that. He collapsed over Gordon's plunging body. There was the scraping of steel on concrete, followed by a peculiarly satisfying thwacking sound as the Russian's head hit the concrete floor. A bayonet rang metallically. The soldier had drawn it, prepared to meet Gordon's rush with cold steel. But he hadn't expected a low tackle. He was out.

Gordon fumbled fiercely at the unconscious man's body. He dragged away a small, compact box with wires extending from it. There was a tiny hearing-aid-type ear-

phone, and an even tinier throat-mike. It was almost precisely like those short-range short-wave sets that are used on television stages, to direct the technical staff from the control-room. This man had been sent to herd Gordon this way or that, and he'd needed to receive instructions constantly.

Gordon said coldly into the throat-mike, in Russian:

"I've knocked your man cold. Suppose you send some more men to take care of me. I promise them some good combat-practice!"

His mission had failed. He was a dead man. He ground his teeth and almost foamed with fury. Almost he was tempted to make use of the tooth-cap that would bring death quickly, but he was too angry. They had played with him. They could kill him at any instant. But he was filled with such blind fury that he could not consider dying without taking others with him.

There was a pause. Then a very tiny humming sound from his fingers. The hearing-aid earphone was making noises. He put it to his ear. A suave voice said:

"Comrade spy, you know that we could have killed you any time we chose. Now that

you know you are helpless, wait a moment. We may make you a proposal. Or we may not."

Gordon found himself snarling. He knew better than to accept any offer that might be made him. Still, they might think him an even greater fool than he was. He frenziedly longed to make his death costly. He could race back to that recreation-room and detonate his dynatol-garments in the middle of off-duty soldiers. But that would destroy only cannon-fodder—men no more valuable than himself. He did not hate Russian private soldiers. His flaming fury was directed toward the directors of such monstrosities as this installation had been created for. He yearned to kill the men who kidnapped honest scientists and brainwashed them and turned them into bright-eyed robots who publicly broadcast acknowledgements of lies; into zombies who obediently said and did **anything** their captors required. Especially Gordon longed to destroy those who had broken Woodbury — a man and a brother-scientist and an **American**—and turned him into what they had made him.

The voice said placidly in his ear, in English:

"Comrade spy, you know

that we can kill you. Probably you are prepared to kill yourself. But we will make a bargain. You would not be sent here as an ordinary spy. You should have very special training. We have a problem. If you will solve it, we will let you go."

Gordon said savagely:

"Yes? To permit me to tell what this place is like? The hell you will!"

The voice did not comment. Instead it said, almost humorously:

"The problem was presented by the American Woodbury. He was a refugee from the United States. He underwent conditioning, and he became extremely anxious to aid us in our researches. But we doubt that the conditioning may have destroyed the finer qualities of his brain. If you can solve this for us, it will determine whether we carry our conditioning quite so far on other fugitives."

"You mean," said Gordon coldly—he was so filled with hate that it went past the point of being felt—"you mean you think you've been torturing people past the point of usefulness. And you want me to settle the question."

He stood in a damp, stinking corridor underground. The man he had tackled

breathed stentoriously at his feet. Gordon was in the middle of an enemy stronghold, watched by scanners every instant, and there was no human power that could possibly help him.

The voice said cordially:

"Precisely! Precisely! If we torment our helpers too much, and you convince us of the fact, we will not carry matters so far hereafter. So you may do your fugitive countrymen a favor if you solve our problem."

Gordon said icily:

"Well?"

"Take what precautions you please," said the voice in his ear, "and follow the lighted corridors. We will arrange the lighting to guide you. You will come presently to a room in which there is an electronic device. You will tell us what it was designed to do."

Gordon snarled, "I need more information than that!"

The voice explained in the same amiable fashion:

"Woodbury made it. We required that he explain its theory before it was completed. His explanation was absurd. It was not only contrary to dialectical materialism, it was not even materialistic! It was ridiculous! He babbled of thought as if it were an im-

material thing-in-itself! He spoke of thought as a reality capable of physical effects! Perhaps he hoped to deceive us. He could have gone mad. When we reasoned with him to tell us the actual truth, he died. And we still do not know if he was mad, or if he tried deception."

Gordon felt pure horror. He had two complete justifications for it. The first was that Woodbury had plainly been tortured to death because he had made a device the Russians could not understand, and the second was that he had not been mad. He had told the truth! He had given them psionic principles, which not only their minds but even their memories rejected as gibberish. Woodbury could have told them the truth because he knew they would not believe it, but he had died because he could not invent lies they could accept.

"You will examine the device," said the amused voice, "and you will tell us what it should do. From your answer we will know how far a scientific mind can be rearranged before its sanity departs."

"And then," said Gordon, "you will kill me or else try to enslave me too."

The voice in the tiny headphone said placidly:

"Nevertheless you may save your compatriots some suffering."

Gordon swallowed, with a dry throat. The threat to himself did not seem too great. He had five pounds of high explosive set to detonate next to his body. There was that special cap on his tooth. Being warned, they could not seize him without his being able to set off the dynatol or swallow the pellet from his tooth. And he might be able to do damage where it would count. . . .

"For the hell of it," said Gordon harshly, "and just on the offchance that I may help some poor devil, I'll do it. But you won't take me alive!"

"Follow the lighted corridors," said the voice in his ear, complacently, "and take what precautions you please."

Gordon moved. He was infinitely careful. He followed the lighted corridor. When it branched, he looked down both ways with his hand on the detonating device that would turn him into a human bomb. He loosened the tooth-cap. They could not seize him!

It was nearly three hundred yards before he saw a lighted door and a lighted room ahead. It was obviously a laboratory, large and brilliantly illuminated. On a table were storage batteries and a device

which was partly radio tubes and partly peculiarly-shaped reflectors of metal, and partly a double helix behind a copper Moebius strip. He approached with the most desperate caution and alertness that could possibly be imagined. He reached the door and put out a careful hand.

Then his head was sagging, and he was seated in a chair, stripped of all his clothing. His jaw hurt and the precautionary tooth-cap was gone from inside his mouth, and he was wrapped in a veritable cocoon of cordage which bound him immovably. He could not stir any part of his body but his head.

A pink-cheeked, cherubic-looking Russian in uniform nodded amiably at him. There were other men in the room. It was the laboratory. The same peculiar electronic device reposed on a table some ten feet from Gordon's chair.

"Ah!" said the Russian blandly. It was the voice of the tiny ear-phone. "You are with us again!"

Gordon tasted blood. He realized that not only the one special tooth-cap had been removed, but other dental work put in to replace it. They'd made sure he could not poison himself!

The pink-faced Russian glowed happily.

"An American made the device that stunned you," he said brightly. "He was quite resistant, but presently he became cooperative and we asked him for a death-ray. He made a device which projects ultrasonic waves in air, with ten kilowatts of maximum output."

Even in his state of dazed despair, some part of Gordon's brain came up with the fact that a sound-track delivers no more than fifteen watts of power turned into sound. Ten kilowatts of sound would kill anything!

"We have been able to restrict it so that a sufficiently short blast does not kill, but merely stuns — instantly. We find that it is not a really practical death-ray because its range is limited. I suspect that you Americans might try to use it as an anaesthetic. But we do not study anaesthetics here! Quite the reverse!"

Gordon cursed him, thickly. He could understand it, now. So much of pure sound would paralyze a living being before any possible reflex could operate a detonator.

The Russian smirked, his head to one side.

"Now to business! You know that you will tell us

what we ask. The only question is how much you will suffer before you do so. There will be no difference except to yourself, and it is no greater treason to speak comfortably than to scream. You may examine this device. It is what the American Woodbury made. Do you know what it is?"

Gordon stared at it. He felt himself going slowly gray as he realized that this was everything he had feared Woodbury might accomplish for his captors. This part of the apparatus was a development of a psionic theory Woodbury had held as a mere speculation a year ago, and that part was proof that another theory had been found to be mistaken. The Moebius strip was the solution of a problem of unipolarity. The helix—

Gordon's brain told him what the device had been meant to be. He even felt a peculiar, numbed admiration for the brilliant thinking behind it. But horror filled him. He could see that it was incomplete. He could even tell what was needed to complete it. Yet he would never have been able to design it himself. It was the utterly perfect demonstration of the way Woodbury's mind worked. When he

had finished the set-up for an experiment, it was characteristic of his experimental designs that they made beautifully clear what they were meant to demonstrate, and that the facts of the experiment could not possibly be more perfectly shown by any other design of parts. But this was psionics, carried past theory to action! This thing could—

Horror filled Gordon to the exclusion of every other possible emotion. This could end the cold war, certainly! No nation with this could possibly fail to win *any* war! Even the United States—of sheer necessity—would use a device like this to end the present situation of intolerable international strain. There would not even be a battle. There would not be even a bombing. This was victory! But the Russians had it; Why hadn't they—

The pink-cheeked Russian laughed softly as Gordon blinked in sudden incredulous understanding.

"I see," said the Russian amiably, "that you know what it is. Name it!"

Gordon's throat worked. Woodbury had made it, and he would have known the one truth the Russians could not penetrate. He'd have told them

the truth about this device. Gordon said in a thin whisper:

"It's a teleporter."

"Splendid!" said the cherubic man. "Then why does not your nation use it?"

"Woodbury," said Gordon in the same thin, uncontrollable whisper, "was working on it. He—hadn't worked out all the theory when you kidnaped him. It's—complete now. The theory is. But the machine isn't complete."

The short stout Russian rubbed his hands.

"Most cooperative!" he said in bland approval. "Now tell us what parts are missing, Comrade spy!"

Gordon swallowed blood. His eyes could not tear themselves from the device. It was agony to see it, so plainly a design in Woodbury's own manner, so magnificently intelligible once you knew the bare beginning of the principles by which it worked. It was crystal-clear — if you could accept the principles behind it. But it was utterly cryptic if you did not know elementary theoretic psionics. And if you could not accept any but strictly materialistic ideas, you could not even grasp psionics. The Russians had the domination of the world in this underground

room. It was as obvious as ABC. But the Russians would not use the mental alphabet of the rest of the world.

"There should—" said Gordon thickly, while his eyes devoured the machine and his brain knew swiftly that this feature of its operation was controlled so, and this operation was governed by that, and the sequence of operational instructions had to follow this exact pattern. Woodbury had been infinitely intelligent in designing this machine! "There should be," said Gordon, "a quarter-sphere reflector, and a quarter-circle bar, and a spidery plate to integrate all the settings before it can operate. The quarter-sphere reflector belongs half a diameter from that Moebius strip."

"Splendid!" said the pink-cheeked man happily. "My assistants will assemble it under your instructions."

Gordon looked at him almost incredulously. It was a fact that the device which was so clear to him did not have any meaning to any of the technicians in this room. Then he realized that they could not grasp that the crude and bulky condenser beside the helix had to be so massive because it must not only have

such-and-such a capacity, but such-and-such a mass. The Moebius strip had to have not only a single surface, but it had to be of a specific diameter. The helix had to have that precise ratio between the number of turns in its inner and outer coils. . . .

He licked his lips and told exactly how the quarter-sphere should be placed. A technician bolted it into place.

"Before—before you put on the curved bar," said Gordon unsteadily, "the left-hand bank of tubes has to be lighted. It has to have a certain field in existence when the bar is put in place."

The technician started to put the bar in backwards. Gordon told him, dry-throated, to turn it around. He obeyed. Gordon was bound so tightly that he literally could not move a finger. He was not quite ten feet from the device.

The pink-cheeked man now smiled angelically at Gordon.

"Now," he said happily, "we stop! Now you tell us how the device operates! The remaining part is the manual control. Woodbury expected to assemble that, and to be allowed to shift the device to make it operate. But we stopped him. We stop you. You do understand this machine. It is

not a new machine. The United States makes use of it. Two men would not know how to make a truly new device which Woodbury had invented for us!"

He beamed at Gordon. He wiped his lips. He giggled.

"Both of you," he said happily, "used the word 'teleporter.' Once, for deception, a new device of warfare was called a 'tank.' There have been code words for innumerable operations. 'Teleporter' is a code word for—" He giggled again. "For the most secret of American atomic-fission devices, is it not? Woodbury made a device which has not a particle of radio-active substance in it, and he hoped to set it to operating and so to explode in this room, did he not? He was quite sane, was he not—and trying to avoid cooperating with us by pretending that he was making something else while actually he made an atomic bomb?"

He made a gesture. Two men came from the side of the room. They carried small devices which Gordon knew would turn him sick if they reached his eyes.

"Woodbury was sane," said the pink-cheeked man happily, "and he was very clever. So we can apply much more pressure—you will call it torture

—before we destroy a scientific intellect! Now you will explain the theory of this atomic bomb, Comrade spy. You will explain it so we can duplicate this apparatus and explode it—safely far away—and then we will reward you. Then we will let you alone! You have no idea how wonderful the idea of being let alone can become! But you will learn!"

He chuckled and giggled to himself as the two men approached Gordon.

He looked at the device Woodbury had made. He thought, very carefully, the things that must be the first order of instruction to a psionic device, and then he thought the things that simply had to be the second order of instructions, and then he thought fiercely of something else. . . .

The walls of the room faded into mistiness. They melted as if they had turned to fog and the fog had evaporated. The lights of the room abruptly went out and there was no illumination anywhere except the tubes of the device itself. All the tubes were lighted now—the first bank had turned them on when the mental instructions were completed. They had needed special volt-

ages, so of course they were operated by batteries.

Then other lights glowed faintly in what seemed illimitable distance outside, and they flared swiftly into very great brightness indeed, and suddenly there were other walls in view. But they were farther away than the underground room's walls had been, and there were desks against the walls, and men were starting up from them.

Sounds came. Shoutings, which swelled from faintness to full volume. There was a circle of flooring, quite neatly removed from everything connected with the underground Siberian installation, which now appeared to be in a very peculiar place indeed. On that circle was the device Woodbury had made. Gordon was there, bound helplessly in his chair. The pink-cheeked Russian was there, suddenly aghast and unbelieving, and the technicians, and the torture-instruments. But the neat circle of plans was no longer in Siberia. It rested—teleported—in the room of foreign desks in Counter-Espionage, in Washington, and the men starting up from their desks wore United States uniforms, and the guards called in by their shouts carried typical American rifles — and they

were ready and anxious to fight.

Gordon shouted:

"Get those Russkies, quick! And turn me loose! Here's a gadget Woodbury made!"

There were rifles pointed at everybody by that time. The guards and staff of Counter-Espionage took over very efficiently, if amazedly. They took no chances at all. They even held guns on Gordon until he was completely unwrapped and released and had been fully identified.

It was less than an hour before the highest of all military authorities listened carefully to Gordon. The foreign-desk room of Counter-Espionage was no longer occupied by men who evaluated reports from abroad. It was occupied only by the circle of planking and the device on the table, and by Gordon, explaining to the high brass.

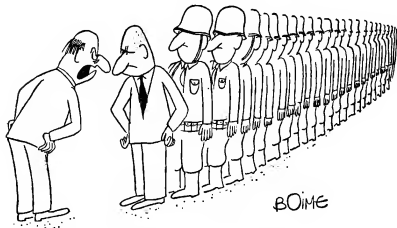
"Woodbury made it," he said carefully. "That is, he designed it and had the Russians make the parts, while he was their prisoner. After they thought they'd cracked his brain. But they got suspicious when he almost had it put together. They took him away and tried to make him explain the theory. And he fooled them. They couldn't

have believed him, even if he told them the absolute truth to the last detail. They're conditioned so that they can't believe there are realities which are immaterial. They can't believe anything that contradicts their basic assumptions of what can be true, and what can't. They're conditioned to dialectical materialism and all it implies. Their minds are frozen! So they couldn't believe that thought could affect matter—though we move our bodies and build cities—and they tortured Woodbury until he died, trying to get him to tell them something they could believe. They simply couldn't believe there could really be a teleporter. Its basic principles are things

these people *can't* believe!"

The array of top brass examined the machine. Gordon answered questions, but with reserve. Nobody who is really security-conscious wants to know secrets he does not have to know for the proper performance of his duty. Presently he was explaining how he'd made use of Woodbury's creation.

"The Russians couldn't understand it," he repeated, "and they especially couldn't understand that a manual control wasn't necessary. Thought alone could trigger it! Once you know the first thing about psionics, you see not only how it does work, but why it has to, and how to control it—and even something else that it can



"Oh, yeah? You and what army?"

do. You see, this thing can not only transfer itself from any place to any other, with a circle of space around it. It can be set to teleport things from other places to here!"

High military authority did not understand and—wisely—preferred not to know matters it did not fully need. But one major-general did observe somewhat grimly that there could be repercussions, if a circle of flooring and a mysterious device and a certain number of Russians had vanished from the heart of a Siberian fortress. They were scared, anyhow. If they thought some new scientific device had just been completed to be used against Russia, they might start a shooting war in pure funk.

"Woodbury'd thought of that," said Gordon, painstakingly. "He was set to handle it as soon as he escaped. If you'll bring in some guards to handle a few upset individuals, and if you arrange for some high-level illegality, we can do a little kidnaping ourselves. As I said, this machine will teleport anything from anywhere to here, if it's set

for it. *Anything* includes anybody. If we start plucking loose the members of the Politburo from wherever they are, and then work on down, by daybreak we can have the USSR so thoroughly disorganized that they *can't* start a war! We'll have all the people who could order hostilities started, locked up right here in the city jail in Washington! And then we won't even have to worry about a cold war!"

And so it was done.

An odd idea came to Gordon as the startled, frantic, bewildered men from Russia began to arrive in improvised reception-chambers at Counter-Intelligence headquarters. There was an old saying that if a man made a better mousetrap, the world would beat a path to his door. These hysterical great ones of the Soviet Union, snatched mysteriously from their proper places to be made harmless to the world—they weren't exactly beating a path to Washington, but the result was the same. It had to be the same!

This better mousetrap worked beautifully!

THE END



By ROBERT BLOCH

YOU COULD BE WRONG

It started the day that Harry Jessup bought a TV set. Even then it might have worked out all right, only he started to worry about the commercials.

The end was inevitable. Too bad that the innocent victims had to be his own wife and a good friend. Or was "innocent" the right word?

WHEN Harry Jessup came back from Korea, he wasn't aware of the change. Not immediately.

Marge was still waiting for him, so they got married and bought a little ranchhouse out in Skyland Park. Harry got a job at Everlift, and although he noticed money didn't seem

to go very far these days, he managed to get along. He and Marge made friends with the couple next door—the Myers, very nice people; Ed Myers was a CPA—and pretty soon they bought a television set.

That's probably what set him off.

One night he and Marge



Was Harry the only one who could see the world's false front?

were watching the Sloucho Marks quiz show. Harry had always liked Sloucho in the old days, when he was making pictures, and he could still quote most of the lyrics to *Hooray For Captain Mauldin*.

Marge kept laughing at Sloucho's cracks during the program, and she was a little surprised to see that Harry was just sitting there, staring at the screen. He never smiled. When it was time for the last commercial, Harry got up and turned off the set.

"What's the matter?" Marge asked.

Harry muttered something that sounded like, "Fake!" but Marge wasn't really interested in his reply. She'd asked a purely rhetorical question and intended to follow it up with certain remarks which she now delivered.

"I thought it was a very funny show, myself," she said. "What's wrong with you, Harry? You always liked Sloucho Marks before."

"Yeah," Harry said. He just sat there, staring at the blank screen.

"You've got to admit he's the cleverest ad-libber in the world," Marge persisted. "Maybe he's a little corny, but I'd like to see you do any better, Harry Jessup."

Harry scowled at her.

"Perhaps I could," he murmured, "if I had four writers."

"Four writers?" Marge was genuinely shocked. "What are you talking about?"

"He's got four writers," Harry said. "I read about it in the paper."

Marge sniffed. "Why, I never heard of such a ridiculous idea! Everybody knows it wouldn't work. How can anybody write such a show in advance when they don't know who's going to be chosen as contestants?"

"They know," Harry told her. "It's all fixed in advance. Rehearsals and everything."

"Nonsense!"

"Some of the people who are going to be on the show even advertise ahead of time in the Hollywood trade papers," Harry said.

"Who told you that?"

"Read it."

"Well, I don't believe a word of it," Marge declared. "I think you're just jealous, or something. I bet you wouldn't mind trading places with Sloucho Marks any day."

"Maybe I could," Harry answered.

"What *are* you talking about?" Marge sat down heavily and began tapping her foot.

"I mean, maybe I could be

Sloucho Marks," Harry said. "How do you know you're seeing the real Sloucho on TV now?"

"Oh, don't be ridiculous! Just because he's given up wearing that false moustache—"

"Did you ever see him before without it? I mean, outside of his last movies where he appeared alone?"

"No—but—"

"Maybe there isn't a real Sloucho," Harry persisted. "Maybe there never was. Remember in one of his early movies where he stood in front of this mirror frame and thought there was glass in it? And Cheeko put on a moustache and pretended to be his reflection? Cheeko looked just like Sloucho. Anybody can, with a little makeup."

"What's come over you, Harry?"

"Nothing. It just occurred to me how easy it would be to pull off a stunt like that nowadays. Anybody with four writers and a physical resemblance could act the part. The whole thing's a fake from start to finish. A pretended ad-libber purporting to interview phony contestants in a comedy show which is supposed to be a quiz program. All a big fraud."

"I don't understand why you're getting so riled up over nothing," Marge snapped. "If you get right down to it, Sloucho certainly didn't write all his own parts in the old days."

"Of course not." Harry sighed. "But nobody ever tried to pretend he did. When you saw him on the stage or in the movies, you knew it was make-believe. Now they try to get you to think it's real. That's what bothers me."

"But it is real. You saw it!"

Harry Jessup shook his head. "No I didn't. And neither did you. All we saw was a wave-pattern, reproduced. You don't really see a picture on TV; your eyes merely interpret it that way. Same as moving pictures—they don't move. I was reading all about it in *Popular*—"

Marge sniffed again. "Did it ever occur to your precious intellect that maybe what you read is phony, too? Just because it's printed somewhere, that's no reason you have to believe it any more than if you saw it."

Harry blinked. "I never thought of that angle before."

Marge saw her advantage and pursued it. "Well, suppose you think about it before you sound off any more. How do you know it's true Sloucho

has four writers? That could be a lie, too." She smiled triumphantly.

"Yes." Harry didn't smile back. "Yes, it could be, couldn't it? But why—that's what I want to know. What's the meaning of it?" He paused and stared down at Marge's foot.

Marge noticed his stare and stopped tapping. "Sorry," she said. "Didn't mean to get on your nerves."

"Well, it does," Harry declared. "I wish you wouldn't wear those heels. You're five-feet-two. Why must you pretend to be five-feet-four?"

Marge went over and put her hand on Harry's forehead. When she spoke, her voice was soft. "What's gotten into you?" she asked. "Don't you feel well?"

Harry reached up and clasped her hand. He pulled it down to eye-level. "Nail polish," he muttered. "Pretending you have red nails. Don't understand it."

"You're sick. You've got a fever——" Marge rose. "I'll get the thermometer and we'll see."

He shook his head. "I don't need any thermometer."

Marge decided to humor him. "Just for fun," she said. "After all, it's a brand new one. I just bought it, and we

might as well get *some* use out of it."

"New one. That's just the trouble. It might be a phony, too. Built to register fever when there isn't any."

"Harry!"

"I'm going to bed." He stood up and shuffled over to the door. "You asked what's gotten into me," he said. "I don't know. Maybe it's honesty."

Marge knew better. Harry had a fever, all right. He went to work Friday, but when he came home his face was flushed and his eyes were red. He didn't say very much, either.

They sat down to eat, and Harry stared at his plate. "What's this?" he asked in a harsh voice.

"Mock chicken legs."

"Mock chicken?" Harry pushed his plate away. "Why can't we have real chicken for a change?"

"I don't know. I just thought——"

Harry was looking over the table now, muttering to himself. "White bread. You know how they make white bread these days? Take all the nourishment out and then fortify it artificially with vitamins. Oleo instead of butter. Process cheese. That's syn-

thetic, too. And instant coffee—"

"But you know how much regular coffee costs nowadays, dear."

"Doesn't matter. Suppose it was beer instead of coffee. Same thing. Brewed with chemicals instead of the old way. Even the water isn't water any more—it's something filled with chlorine and fluorine and heaven only knows what."

Harry pushed back his chair.

"Where are you going?"

"Out for a walk."

Marge drew in her breath. "You aren't going down to the tavern—?"

He made a barking sound, then caught himself. "What's the matter with me?" he said. "Can't I even come up with a genuine laugh any more? It's getting me fast, the thing's contagious, isn't it?"

"Harry, you promised you wouldn't go to that tavern—"

"Don't worry about me." He smiled. "Tavern! It isn't a tavern, it's a saloon. No such thing as a real tavern, you know. Just a name they use to make it sound fancy. In a real tavern you used to be able to drink whiskey. Nowadays you get something called a blend—65 per cent or 72 per cent neutral spirits,

artificially aged in imitation-charred casks. Fake!"

Marge came over to him, but he pushed her away. "Why do you use perfume?" he asked. "You don't smell that way, really."

"Lie down," she whispered. "I'll call Doctor Lorentz."

"Don't want a doctor. Just going for a walk. Got to think." Harry looked at the wall. "Quit my job today."

"Quit your job?" She was suddenly tense. "Why?"

"Tired of it. Tired of making brassieres. Falsies. That's what they call them and that's what they are—false. I want to get into something real."

He backed over to the door. "Don't worry. We'll work things out. I'll figure a way, if there is a way."

Then he was gone.

For a moment, Marge watched him through the window, then bit her lip and hurried to the telephone.

Harry came back in about an hour. Marge met him at the door.

"Feel better, dear?" she asked.

"Yeah." He patted her shoulder. "I'm all right."

"Good." She smiled. "Ed Myers is in the living room."

"What's he doing here?"

"Just dropped in to visit."

Thought he'd like to talk to you, I guess."

"You *guess!*" Harry stepped back. "You told him to come over, didn't you?"

"Well——"

"Lies," he muttered. "All lies. Oh, what the hell, I'll see him."

He strode into the living room.

"Hello, Harry," said Ed Myers. Myers was a big, blonde, jolly fat man with round baby-blue eyes. He sat there in the easy chair, puffing on a cigarette.

"Hi," Harry said. "Want a drink?"

"No, thanks. Just dropped in for a minute."

Harry sat down and Myers grinned amiably. "How's tricks?" he asked.

"Tricks! It's all tricks."

"What's that?"

"You heard me. You ought to know. You and this 'just dropped in for a minute' routine. Marge called you over, didn't she?"

"Well——"

"What did she tell you?"

Harry leaned forward, his expression angry.

"Nothing, really. That is, she said you'd been sort of under the weather lately. Figured there might be something on your mind you'd like to talk about. And seeing

as how I'm a friend of yours——"

"Are you?"

"You know that, pal."

"Do I? I'm beginning to wonder if I know anything. Maybe that's it—I didn't know, but I'm starting to find out."

"I don't get it, Harry."

"Just took a walk. Walked around the block a couple of times, then down to the corner. What did I see?"

"You got me, pal. What did you see?"

"Fakes. Phonies. Frauds."

"This doesn't sound like you, Harry."

"How do you know what I sound like? Really, I mean?" Harry Jessup bit his lip. "Listen, and I'll try to explain. I walk down the street and I look back at this house. This house—what is it? They call it a 'ranchhouse.' Why? It's not on a ranch. It's not the kind of a house anybody ever built on a real ranch. Just a five-room crackerbox with a fake gable in front and a fake chimney to indicate a non-existent fireplace. This neighborhood is full of them. A thousand neighborhoods are full of them. Must be five, maybe ten million such places built in the last few years."

"So why get excited over a thing like that?"

"I'm not excited. Just curious. About a lot of things. Skyland Park, for instance. That's the name of this suburb, isn't it? But it's not a park, and there's no view of the sky around here. Everything's blotted out by TV aerials. People sitting in the dark, watching something that's not real but pretending to themselves that it is."

Ed Myers chuckled. "Marge told me about Sloucho Marks," he said. "Mean to say you let a little thing like that get on your nerves?"

"It isn't a little thing, Ed. At least, I don't think so. Everything's like that nowadays. I didn't understand at first when I came back, but I get the picture now. I got it tonight. The TV all over, and men standing outside washing their cars. Hundreds of average men, but none of them own an average car."

"How's that again?"

"Ever stop to think about that, Ed? No average cars any more. Everybody's got a Commander, or a Land Cruiser, or a Coup de Ville or a Roadmaster or a Champion. Even the poorest slob owns a Super Deluxe Model. Aren't there any plain, old-fashioned automobiles any more? I haven't seen any. Just mil-

lions of Hornets and Ambassadors and Strato-jets, driven by people who have no place to go. No *real* place, that is. They drive to the movies and see 3D which isn't really three-dimensional, or they go over to a grocery store built like an Italian Doge's palace which calls itself a Supermarket and offers Below Cost Bargains yet still makes a profit, and——"

"Dig this!" Ed Myers chuckled again. "You talk like a Commie."

"How do you know how a Commie talks?" Harry retorted. "You ever hear one? Did you ever see one in the flesh?"

"Why, no, but I read the papers, everybody knows about Communists."

"You mean everybody is *told* about them. You read what's printed, that's all. How do you know any of it ever happened?"

"Hey, wait a minute, Harry!"

"You read about the President's latest speech, but he didn't write it—some team of ghostwriters ground it out. You read about the war, and what you read is censored. You read about some movie star, and it turns out to be a planted publicity story, concerning an interview that never occurred. How do you

know what actually happens? Or if anything is actually happening?"

"Say, you *are* serious, aren't you?"

"I don't know. I walked and walked tonight, trying to figure things out. Nothing makes sense. Ed, I saw the kids in the street. Little kids running around playing cops and robbers, cowboy and Indian, playing war. It scared me."

"Why should it scare you, pal? Didn't you do those things when you were a kid?"

"Sure. Of course I did. But I didn't play the same way. I *knew* it was a game, just making-believe. I'm not so sure about the kids today. I swear, from the way they act, they think it's real."

"Harry, you're making a mountain out of a molehill."

"That's the fashion, isn't it? If I really knew how, I could become quite wealthy in these times. Anybody who can take a molehill and persuade people into thinking it's a mountain is right in style. Look at that!"

Ed Myers was lighting another cigarette, but Harry snatched it out of his mouth.

"Here you are," he said. "Perfect example. The world's finest tobacco, isn't it? Mildest, choicest, most expen-

sive blend. That's how it's advertised. Do you believe it? Do you realize there are a hundred brands that cost more, taste better?"

"But everybody knows about advertising——"

"I'm not talking about advertising. It used to be bad enough, when advertising was the only big offender. But things like this are happening all over. We're losing the truth, Ed. The truth about everything. Politics, government, world affairs, business, education—we get it all through a filter, selected and distorted. Where has reality disappeared to?"

"You're getting yourself all worked up over nothing," Ed Myers said. "What you need is a vacation, little relaxation."

"Relaxation? How? I listened to the radio last Sunday. Jack Benny. He did a show which was supposed to take place ten minutes before he went on the air. In the middle of the program he pretended he was going on the air and got himself introduced all over again. Then in a few minutes, during the pretended show, he was supposed to go over to visit the home of a cast-member. By this time I couldn't even follow what he was pretending to pretend.

"Movies are worse. Did you ever see that oldie, *Jolson Sings Again*? Larry Parks plays Jolson, of course, but Jolson did the singing. That's par for the course these days. But then, in the middle of the picture, Parks as Jolson is supposed to meet Parks as Parks. And he plays both parts. Parks-Jolson talks to Parks-Parks about making a picture of Jolson's life, and then the picture of Jolson's life goes on to show how a picture of Jolson's life was made. Only what is shown isn't what really happened to begin with, so——"

"Calm down, boy!" Myers grinned. "It's all in fun."

"I'm calm. But I'm not so sure about the fun part. Not any more. This is getting serious. I happen to like real things. And everything is ersatz."

"You're just picking out a few examples and magnifying them all out of proportion."

"Proportion? How do we know what proportion is? You've got to have something to measure against. Pontius Pilate asked 'What is Truth?' I'm still worried about the answer."

"Well, if you want to drag religion into it——"

"I'm not dragging religion into it. Look at yourself, for

example." Harry Jessup was on his feet now, almost shouting. "You're wearing a sports jacket. You a sportsman by any chance? No. Examine those pearl buttons. Are they made of pearl? Not on your life. That gold watchband—it's not gold, is it? Regimental stripe tie. You ever belong to the Coldstream Guards? Your shoes, with the leather heels that aren't even leather. Fake, every bit of it a fake! And you're so used to a world of fakery you aren't even conscious of it any more. CPA, that's your job. Filling out fake income tax returns for fake business men who contribute sums for fictitious government expenditures——"

"Harry, you're shouting!" Marge came into the room. "What's wrong?"

"Everything." He went over to her now and his finger stabbed again and again. He talked for Ed Myers' benefit. "Look at her. Blonde curly hair. Know why? Bleach and a permanent wave. Two false teeth in front. Foundation garment to disguise her shape. Been married to her for almost a year, and I swear I've never seen her real face—just a lot of makeup. Makeup and fake mannerisms, that's all she is!"

Marge started to cry. "You see," she sobbed. "That's what I meant. He's been like this ever since last night."

Ed Myers wasn't smiling any more. He nodded gravely. "Maybe we ought to call some specialist and——"

"Wait a minute," Harry said. "Wait a minute! You think I'm cracking up, don't you? You think I'm real gone in the head."

Myers shrugged. He didn't say anything.

"All right." Harry lowered his voice with an effort. "All right. Maybe I'd better tell you the rest."

"The rest?" Marge stopped sniffing. Ed Myers hunched forward, picking at his ear.

"Yeah. I never said anything about it before, because I thought it was just a lot of malarkey when I heard it. Now I'm not so sure."

"Heard what?" Myers asked.

"About the bombs." Harry took a deep breath. "Last year, when I was in Korea, this rumor came along. Nobody ever found out how it started. Anyway, we all heard it. According to the way it went, the Russians came over and bombed the United States. Bombed hell out of it. That was one story. At the

same time, we heard another. This one was different. According to the second rumor, it wasn't the Russians at all. Some of our own scientists came up with a new kind of bomb. They tested it but there was a chain-reaction, a big one. Blew up the whole damn' country!"

"A specialist——" Myers began.

"Wait. Let me finish. Then you can call your specialist, if you want to. Somebody ought to be able to give me an answer."

Marge came over to Harry and put her hand on his arm. "Listen to me, Harry," she said. "Are you trying to tell me you think the country was destroyed while you were in Service?"

"I don't know," he muttered. "I don't know what I'm trying to tell you, or myself, either."

"Be reasonable, Harry. Think for a moment. You're *here*, aren't you? and so are we. We're *in* this country. So how could it be destroyed? Do you see any ruins, any signs of bombing?"

"No. But I wouldn't. Not if all the real things were gone and the fakes remained. You can't destroy what actually doesn't exist."

Ed Myers stood up. He

glanced significantly at Marge. "Let me use your phone," he said.

Marge waved her hand. "Wait. Not yet. Give him a chance to explain."

"Thanks." Harry smiled up at her gratefully. "You know, this business of *seeing* things proves nothing. They say when you're born, you see things upside down. I don't understand it, but the image is supposed to be received on the retina that way, and then translated by the brain so that you think it's right-side up. The whole business of seeing is cockeyed, anyhow. This thing that looks like a table, as I remember it, is just trillions and trillions of little particles jumping up and down in waves. All our senses are playing tricks on us; smell, hearing, everything. Lots of people get hallucinations——"

"Don't they, though?" Myers glanced again at Marge, and picked at his right ear once more.

"Please," Marge whispered.

Harry went on. "So maybe none of us ever comes close to Reality, after all. We just sort of *agree* amongst ourselves that certain things are real and certain things are not real. We base those agree-

ments on the evidence of our senses; if we all get just about the same reactions, we decide to believe or disbelieve accordingly. You follow me?"

"I think so," Marge said. "But doesn't that prove you're living in a real world?"

"Not any more. Not since this phony stuff took over, the way it has in the last ten years or so. I said our senses can play tricks. Maybe they've gotten so used to the fakes they can't detect the difference any more. Maybe there's a sort of a balancing-point somewhere. As long as 50 per cent of our environment is real, we're safe. We can still recognize it, use it as a gauge to judge our surroundings. But when there isn't 50 per cent left—when more than half of the things we see, or hear, or say, or do, or own or experience are false—then how can we tell? Maybe we reached that point a long time ago and didn't know it. Maybe we're all hypnotized into believing in the existence of a lot of things. If that was so, then the real world could actually disappear and we'd never even suspect it. Because all the illusions we've come to think of as reality would still remain."

"Sort of a mirage, eh?" Ed Myers nodded. "You sure

worked yourself up a theory, boy. But there's kind of a hole in it, isn't there?"

"Hole?"

"Well, just for the sake of argument, supposing something like that had happened. Let's even use that rumor you and the troops heard over in Korea, about how the whole country was knocked out by chain-reaction. Then how could you come back here again to live? There'd be nothing left, isn't that right? No people, no buildings, no radio or TV or books or movies or any of the stuff you're so badly worried about."

"But if we believed it was here——" Harry started, then stopped. "Come to think of it, I guess you're right."

"Of course I'm right." Myers smiled again. "You just think about it a while, boy. Everything'll straighten out. Take a rest for a few days, you'll get over it."

Marge smiled, too. "You gave us an awful scare, Harry."

"Scare?" Harry Jessup blinked. "Scare? Could that be it?"

"Could what be what?"

"Scare. The flying saucers scare. Remember? We heard all about it. Sure—that could be the answer!"

"Oh, Harry, for heaven's sake——"

"Same deal. Nobody knew whether *they* were real or fake either. But suppose they were real. And they dropped the bombs. A new kind. Wiped out the country and took over. Nobody'd ever know. They'd send out fake reports, create an illusion that nothing had changed. People coming in from abroad would find everything the same. So accustomed to fakery in normal life they wouldn't notice the difference. Just as I didn't notice."

Ed Myers groaned. Marge sighed.

"That's the answer!" Harry cried. "It has to be the answer! Nobody left at all, and the whole thing an illusion built up to protect whoever or whatever owns this country now—built up to fool the few real people left, the ones in Service who came back! They'll just have to keep things going until we're dead and buried and then the masquerade is over."

"No wonder they keep pouring out more and more synthetics all the time! Do it to deaden our faculties, get us so used to the artificial we'll forget there ever was anything real. Who remembers when Hopalong Cassidy was

lame, when Wild Bill Hickok was an outlaw instead of a hero? Today kids think there really was a man named Sherlock Holmes—if there are any kids, that is."

"Are any kids?" Marge shuddered. "Do you know what you're saying now? Are you inferring that——?"

Harry paused. "Yeah," he said, slowly. "Yeah. Come to think of it, I am."

He walked over to Ed Myers, who was still picking his ear. Suddenly he reached out and grabbed at Myers, trying to reach the side of his head.

Myers ducked, moved back in alarm.

"That gray spot," Harry whispered. "I think I know what it is, now."

"Keep away from me!" Ed Myers yelled.

But Harry didn't keep away. He lunged forward, grabbing up the paper-knife from the desk and bringing it down with a single, startling motion.

There was a ripping sound. Harry plunged the paper-knife into Myers' head.

"Look!" he shouted. "I was right—nothing but sawdust! Sawdust and a bunch of cog-wheels."

Myers fell to the floor and lay still.

Marge began to scream.

"Look!" Harry yelled. "Sawdust, all over the rug! Can't you see——?"

He stopped. Marge kept staring at the floor, her scream subsiding to a whimper. "Harry, you've killed him."

"How could I kill something that isn't real? Something stuffed with sawdust?"

"Take another look," Marge said. "That isn't sawdust. It's blood."

Harry took another look. The knife clattered to the floor. He stared down at the slowly widening red pool. . . .

He was still staring when Marge went to the phone. He was still staring when she came back. He was still staring when the squad-car arrived.

After that there were questions, many questions, and a lot of men crowded around, and somebody came in with a camera and flashbulbs and took pictures, and then they took Ed Myers' body away, and finally they took Harry away too.

At the end, there was nobody left but Marge. She was all alone and there was nothing else to do, so she got out the dustpan and the broom and swept up the little pile of sawdust from the floor.

THE END

Two To The Stars

By Ivar Jorgensen

Things have come to a sorry pass, Liddell mused, when a man must face certain death merely by returning to the same planet that had given him his life!

FROM the window of the commander's office you could see the Earth, brilliant blue, the brightest star in the sky. It was a rare time when you could see the Earth or any star through the dense Venusian cloud blanket. Smiling grimly, Liddell thought it was almost as if the commander had somehow arranged it that way.

"We don't expect you to come back alive, Liddell," the commander said. He was a





The rain of missiles drove Liddell into the ship.

small gaunt man who wore the look of too many years of hard service in his bleak eyes. "But someone's got to go."

"Because we can't survive on Venus either?" Liddell asked bitterly. "Is that it? If you're so sure I won't come back alive, you might as well tell me. I won't be in a position to reveal your secret."

"Then you'll go?" the commander demanded eagerly. "I can't force you."

"Yes, I'll go. But I'd like to know. . . ."

"All right, Liddell. We're dying here on Venus. Slowly. We thought the Venusian cloud blanket would keep out the stronger rays of the sun. It only keeps out heat, Liddell. The high frequency radiation is coming through, you see. In another generation, it will kill us."

"What about Mars?" Liddell asked.

"I'm sending a man to Mars. Jacoby. Not that it matters. It's back to Earth—or nothing. There isn't anything for humanity on Mars. Too cold, not enough air, not enough sunlight, not enough moisture. Jacoby will go through the motions, but it won't help us. If we can't return to Earth, humanity is finished."

The last page of the story

of mankind, thought Liddell. Close the book. Half a million years of history, a bare instant of cosmic time in which mankind burned briefly, like a flame, a tiny spark, across one out-of-the-way-speck of a planet. And then nothing but the cold silent vaults of space. Not even memory. . . .

"And you want me to find out if we can return to Earth?" Liddell asked the commander.

"You've got to find out, Liddell."

"But you don't expect me to return. Life can't survive on Earth, can it, sir?"

"Our legends say it can't. Four generations on Venus, and all that remains is legend. A hundred years ago, we poisoned our own planet. A few thousand people escaped. Here. To Venus. But it doesn't matter. We're going to die anyway. Let me tell you something, Liddell. Do you wonder why I selected you?"

Liddell nodded.

"You just had your quarterly physical exam. Routine, you thought. It wasn't routine. You're going to die."

Liddell stood staring out the window at the evening star, the bright blue Earth. Near it was a paler speck in the sky, faint and white. The moon,

Liddell thought. Out there, across thirty-five million miles of nothing, the Earth and the moon. Waiting.

"You mean," Liddell asked, "I'm going to die on Earth? You don't expect me to come back?"

"No. You're going to die, whether you go to Earth or not. Radiation poisoning. All of us in another generation, but on some it works more swiftly. You have six good months left."

"And the prognosis?" Liddell asked automatically.

"Hopeless. Venus is a harsh master. We need every able-bodied man. That's why I'm sending you. I wasn't going to tell you, but somehow I didn't think it was fair. Now you know."

Liddell felt absolutely nothing. No pain, no fear, no regrets. It was too soon. He was twenty-five years old and could measure the remainder of his life in a couple of dozen weeks.

"So, that's why I'm sending you to Earth. We have nothing to lose but the spaceship. If there's an outside chance, you'll find out for us. If Earth can be inhabited again, you'll tell us. You'll save mankind. And then you'll die. I'm sorry, Liddell. That's it."

"Only a few thousand peo-

ple got off Earth a hundred years ago," Liddell said, remembering the legends. "What about all the others, the hundreds of millions who must have survived the war?"

"Radiation," said the commander grimly. Then, for some reason, he smiled. "Here on Venus, it's natural. We can't help it. We're too close to the sun. On Earth it's man-made. We came to Venus to die of the very thing we tried to escape. Ironical, isn't it?"

"When do I leave?" Liddell asked. Now, with the knowledge of his sickness, he suddenly could not bear waiting.

"In the morning. I'm sorry there isn't more time, but—"

"But now that the secret is out you don't want me to have the opportunity to reveal it?"

"That's right. Life is precarious enough on Venus. We can't afford hysteria." The commander stood up. "But I'm probably keeping you. I'm sure there are good-byes which must be said."

"No. Nothing. Tell me, sir. This Jacoby—going to Mars. Does he have radiation sickness too? Is he going to die?"

"Yes."

They shook hands, the commander who would live long enough to watch his children die, and Liddell, for whom the

future had utterly no meaning. Liddell stood outside for a long time in the warm humid darkness. The heavy clouds rolled and brooded and billowed overhead, finally obscuring the bright blue evening star, Earth.

I'm sure there are good-byes which must be said. The words came back to Liddell now, mocking him. Good-byes. He would have none of them, for he could tell Laura-Jean nothing unless he told her the truth. He stood there in the hot damp darkness, trying to conjure up her face. It was not quite right. It never was. Once he had told her he knew he was in love with her because when he tried to think of what she was like, he got it wrong. She was the personification of an ideal, somehow formless and wondrous. He didn't want to see her, not now. He wanted to remember her that way, without tears, without sorrow, in the six months he had left.

Later, much later, he sought out Jacoby and found him in the officer's club down near the marshes which bordered the city on the south. Jacoby was drinking. Jacoby looked at him and he looked at Jacoby and silently they toasted, consuming their monthly liquor ration in two

hours. Jacoby who was going to Mars, a cold, arid, dead world. Liddell who was going to Earth, a world which had killed itself. Each with six months to live. Each staring silently over the rim of his glass and wondering if this was the last time he would ever see a human being.

The spaceship was entirely automatic. Liddell unstrapped himself from the crash hammock after blastoff and stood for a time at the rear port, watching Venus, a great silvery crescent between ship and sun, flash away behind him. Then, clomping noisily forward on magnetic boots, he made his way toward the front of the ship. When he got halfway across the companionway, a voice said, "Fred, Fred, don't be angry."

He whirled and faced her. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her. He wanted to strike her brutally across the face. He wanted to blink his eyes and look again and see she wasn't there. He stood completely still and watched as she patted a handkerchief to her lips, wiping away the blood. There had been but one crash hammock on the spaceship. He tried to imagine the pain she had experienced. "How did you find out?" he

said. There was utterly no expression in his voice.

"I had to come with you, Fred. I love you."

"How did you find out?"

"Sam Jacoby lives in my apartment building. He came in very drunk and very noisy. He mentioned your name. I went out in the hall and talked to him."

"What did he tell you?"

"That you're going to Earth, Fred."

"Anything else?"

"Isn't that enough? You didn't even come to say good-bye."

"I couldn't, Laura-Jean. Don't you see?"

"You said you wanted to marry me. To spend our lives together. Did you think I'd let you go alone?"

"You fool!" Liddell said harshly. "This ship is automatic. I couldn't turn around and take you back if I wanted to."

"If you wanted to . . .?" Laura-Jean said eagerly. "Then you don't? You don't, Fred?"

Almost, he told her. If she was with him and there was nothing he could do about it, she might as well know the truth. She was traveling through space with a dead man. Probably, she wasn't going to return from Earth,

either. But for a different reason. Whether their mission succeeded or failed, Liddell would die. Yet, he couldn't tell her. He tried, but the words wouldn't come. I'm going to die, Laura-Jean. I have radiation sickness. We're all going to die from it eventually, but I'm going to die in six months.

"All right," Liddell sighed. "You're here. You shouldn't have come, but there's nothing we can do about it now. Did Jacoby say why I'm going to Earth?"

"Only that it was very important. He wouldn't tell me why. He said the chances of you coming back were—very small. That's why I had to come, Fred. If it was going to be a year or two or even longer, I could wait. But I can't live without you. I don't want to live without you. I . . . Fred, I'm afraid. Hold me, please. Please, please hold me tight. . . ."

She was warm and softly firm and trembling in his arms. For a long time he held her that way, stroking her hair, whispering words which afterwards he did not remember. When finally he moved away from her, Laura-Jean's eyes were bright with tears. "If we're not going to come back, ever," she said, "and if we're the only two people on

this ship and . . . and, we're not likely to meet any other people, that kind of makes you in charge. You—you're the captain of this ship, Fred. You have the authority. You can do it."

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"You can marry us, silly!" She tried to smile through her tears. She looked suddenly very beautiful and very shy. "Just say the word—Captain, and we're married. Say that we're married, Fred."

For some strange reason he could not himself fathom, he did not. Afterwards, whenever Laura-Jean mentioned it, he grew angry. In his heart, he knew why. That would be the final bond, which he did not want. For the spaceship was automatic. Assuming they could survive on Earth when they reached it, Laura-Jean could return to Venus in the spaceship. If Earth did not prove lethal, Laura-Jean was going to live. True, like everyone else on Venus, her time was limited. One more generation, the commander had said. But somehow, it wasn't so bad that way, dying like that, when everyone died. And somehow, Liddell wanted to prove his love by not laying hands on Laura-Jean. Hands of the dead, he thought. I'm

a walking dead man. It was very important that he did not touch her. If he touched her now, accidentally, he would not be able to stop himself.

Five days later they stood together at the foreport of the spaceship. The light which entered through the quartzite was green-blue and beautiful. The great azure globe of Earth was suspended below them against the velvet immensity of space, black, infinite, star-specked. The globe was rich deep green with tones of blue, frothy puffs of white, streaks and smears and shadows of brown and gray.

"It's beautiful," Laura-Jean said. "It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my whole life."

"It's where our ancestors died," Liddell said bitterly. "Two billion people, in an orgy of self-destruction. You call that beautiful?"

"I don't care what happened once, long ago. I think it's lovely. I have a feeling, Fred. A feeling that maybe—just maybe—God is watching. God is watching us return, and He approves."

That was one of the things they never talked about on Venus. God. God had been left on Earth, forgotten. For, the

leaders had written four generations ago on Venus, had He not forsaken His children? But the word was good, the way Laura-Jean said it. Almost, Liddell believed. But then he remembered the commander's words. The prognosis. Negative. Negative prognosis. What did it matter now, since he was going to die?

A warning light blinked on and off over their heads. A buzzer sounded. "We're going to land," Laura-Jean said, staring raptly through the foreport.

"You use the hammock, Laura-Jean. I'll strap you in."

"If we squeeze real close, we both can use it."

He was going to say no, but under deceleration pressure it would be all right. He would not be able to move. Hip to hip, they reclined on the crash hammock, fastening the straps. At the last moment, he wanted to turn to her and kiss her. But the pressure was on him abruptly, a giant hand pushing at his chest, constricting his entrails, contorting his face. Vaguely he heard the shrill faint scream of friction as the spaceship knifed through Earth's upper atmosphere. The outer hull, he thought, would be glowing bright, like a meteor. A shoot-

ing star—with no human eye on Earth to see it. . . .

It is not so bad, Wendy thought, to be a monster. At first, when you are growing up and the other children taunt you, it is very, very bad. Now, though, she was twenty, and a woman. Now the jeers hardly mattered. Now she could look at the scales, silver blue and actually not ugly at all, which grew in place of skin on her forearms and her legs from knees to toes, without shivering all over and wishing she were dead.

And the others, even the children now, were less cruel. Perhaps they could sense it finally. Perhaps they knew that one day soon there would be nothing but monsters left, because while the radiation was no longer lethal, it could still alter a man's genes. And if she polished her scales, and gave them the silver-blue sheen of forged steel, they were almost attractive. Of course, there were other types of monstrosities, more extreme types. For these Wendy felt not revulsion but pity.

Besides, it was what a man had in his heart that really mattered. There were monsters, all right, real monsters, but not on Earth. The monsters were those with hearts

of black stone who, according to the old legends, had sowed the seeds of radioactive destruction on Earth a hundred years ago and more, and there had left in some mysterious, incomprehensible way, to voyage somewhere in the sky.

It was funny, Wendy thought, the way her people knew about things like genes and chromosomes but knew nothing of the physical sciences or the science of the sky called astronomy. For these things were forbidden, and had been forbidden these hundred years. Ever since the Doom, Wendy thought, remembering the lessons she had learned in school. These things had been forbidden, and with them, history. Legends, approved legends, could be learned. But not history. The history books were burned. We must not—ever—dwell on the past. The past is forgotten. Is dead.

"Wendy, are you listening to me?"

"Huh?—No. No, I'm sorry, Howard. I was thinking."

"For a young girl, you sure can go off into crazy moods sometimes."

"Are you angry at me?"

"No, Wendy. I'm not angry. After we are married, all this will change. You'll take up the duties of a housewife and

won't have to worry that head of yours with thoughts even a man doesn't think."

"You know? You could read my mind?" Some people, Wendy knew, claimed the power. It was another mutation following the Doom. This ability to read minds.

"Not clearly," Howard Croton admitted. "I can just get impressions."

"Well, I'm sorry," Wendy said contritely. "What were you saying?"

"I asked you if you saw the shooting star?"

"No? Where?" All at once, Wendy was interested. It was something from the sky, the forbidden sky. You could make a wish on it and maybe the wish would come true.

"It's gone now," Howard Croton said.

Wendy looked up at him as they walked along the rutted dirt road toward the village of his father. His father, she knew, was head man there, and lived in the biggest house. Even then, it would not be much of a house. For was not machinery forbidden? Everything had to be built by hand, and by yourself and your family. You could not hire labor. No man could hold another in bondage, for wages or anything else.

Howard was handsome, Wendy realized. Hard-looking, in fact cruel-looking, with gray eyes of flint and the high-bridged nose and thin nostrils and cruel slash of a mouth, but terribly attractive. And normal. Except for his ability to read minds, quite normal. It frightened her sometimes. He was normal and good-looking and could have any girl in the village or from the outlying farms. But he had chosen her—a monster. He was handsome and some day he would rule the village in place of his father. Naturally, rule was hereditary. Otherwise, there would be conflict. And it was written that conflict was forbidden, absolutely forbidden—for had not the true monsters who had fled a hundred years ago to the sky almost destroyed the world with conflict? If they ever returned, then it would be different. Then conflict was sanctioned, approved, encouraged. For they must be destroyed before they could bring again the Doom.

It was a fairy story, Wendy thought, and nothing else. They would never return. Perhaps they never existed. But these were secret thoughts, and Wendy never

told them to anyone, not even Howard.

As they neared the village, Wendy watched the farmers' carts and wagons creaking and swaying in across the rutted road with their produce—onions and leeks and potatoes and grain for the people of the village. Carts and wagons, drawn by horses or great hound dogs grown huge after the Doom. And tired-looking farmers who could not use machinery in their fields. Grim-faced, dirty farmers who would work from sunup to sunset and in the autumn prayed for a good harvest moon and clear skies, for then they must work far into the night, too.

"Will you look at that?" Howard Croton said.

Urchins were running toward them from the village, shouting. Most of them were normal children. It was always worse in a village for the monsters, Wendy thought. Somehow, the normal ones sought out the villages and lived there. They saw few monsters from day to day and when one like Wendy appeared, they would usually jeer and taunt her. This was what she expected from the mob of running urchins. She braced herself for it. She had learned to ignore it, but now,

now in front of Howard Croton, it would be different. She drew back and waited there on the rutted road without moving.

But the urchins were not interested in her. They hardly saw her. Incredulously, she listened to their shouts.

"A shooting star!"

"So big . . ."

"Bigger'n the sun!"

"Come down like a ball of fire on t'other side of town."

"Let's go!"

"My mama said not to go, we're kids. That's why we're going around the long way."

"An' it's still smoking an' all, like it was on fire."

And one of the urchins looked at Wendy and saw her for the first time. "Come on, Monster. Wanta see the shooting star?"

They all ran off and began to circle around behind the west end of town.

"Kids," said Howard Croton, smiling at Wendy. "How they can make up tall tales."

"You said you saw the shooting star yourself," Wendy reminded him.

"Yes, but it didn't land. They never land, do they? Those kids have some imagination."

That's what Howard was like, Wendy thought. But since her own imagination

was too child-like and extreme, he complemented her perfectly. "I guess their fathers and mothers have some imagination too," Wendy said without smiling. She pointed up the main street of the village.

Howard Croton frowned. A few stragglers were running up the street away from them, shouting and waving their arms. In another moment, the street was deserted.

"Let's go and see," Wendy said.

Still frowning, Howard Croton followed her. Ten minutes later, along with the three hundred frightened inhabitants of the village which Howard Croton's father ruled, they stood staring at the spaceship.

With thick, numb fingers, Liddell unbuckled the straps which pinned them down to the crash hammock. Laura-Jean was unconscious, but her face, which had been contorted with pain, was now relaxed. She would be all right, Liddell knew, and he stood up unsteadily on legs of rubber. He walked to the foreport but could see nothing. The friction of their passage through the dense lower atmosphere had fused the quartzite, blackening it and making it opaque.

He could walk to the airlock, open it, and put an end to this foolish venture. Earth's atmosphere was poisoned. A split second exposure to it wouldn't be dangerous, and after opening the airlock he could pump the lethal air from the ship. But he hesitated. Laura-Jean had the right idea, he thought. It was nice to dream. He could stand here without doing anything to investigate the conditions outside. He could stand here and look at Laura-Jean, asleep now, on the crash hammock. He could think—and convince himself for a time the thoughts were facts—that Earth had again become a place fit for habitation. But soon—eventually—he would have to open the airlock. And then, the dream shattered, it would be worse.

Laura-Jean's voice came to him. "Sleeping at a time like this. I ought to be ashamed of myself."

Liddell smiled at her. He felt awkward. He could not go to her and touch her, which he wanted. He could not open the airlock, not yet. He just stood there. This was some return to Earth, he thought with a sick feeling deep inside him. It would never go down in the history books.

"What are you waiting

for?" Laura-Jean said, sitting up. "I'm so excited."

"Maybe we ought to have something to eat first," Liddell suggested.

"Are you serious? I couldn't get down a mouthful. If you don't open that airlock door, Fred Liddell, I will."

In the last few moments before landing and unconsciousness, he had finally figured it out. He would satisfy himself and Laura-Jean that Earth was not fit for human life. He would write his report for the commander. Then he would wait until Laura-Jean was asleep, set the automatic controls to take her back to Venus, and walk outside to a quicker death from the more lethal radiation of Earth. It was the only way. If he lingered, it would be that much harder on Laura-Jean. In time she would forget him. She was young. And maybe—although the odds seemed incredibly, terribly against it—Sam Jacoby would find something on Mars.

"Are you coming?" Laura-Jean said.

"We could test the air with a counter."

"No, please. I don't want to do it that way. There's nothing wrong with the air out there, Fred. But . . . but just in case there is, we won't be

hurt if we do it ourselves, will we?"

"No," Liddell said. "We won't be hurt." He waited until Laura-Jean stood alongside him, and then activated the airlock mechanism.

He had no time for surprise. The land was rich and rolling and green-matted with vegetation. And the people—there were hundreds of them. Laura-Jean let out one happy, excited yelp—and then rough hands grabbed them.

"What's the matter with you?" Liddell cried. "Get your goddam hands off us!"

There were shouts, roars. A sea of angry faces eddied and flowed before his eyes. Something clanged metallically against the hull of the spaceship. A stone. And another. One of them struck Liddell's shoulder, numbing it.

"Stop fighting, you fool!" a harsh voice said in his ear. "The people will kill you unless we can get you into prison."

For answer, Liddell tried to struggle free of the hands which held him. And then, all at once, as if he stood detached from what was happening, he took in the rough, obviously homespun garments of the crowd, the lack of firearms in a mob which might

be expected to sport some, the absence of any vehicle except crude wood carts beyond the angry circle of faces. These people are savages, he thought wildly, and renewed his struggles. You couldn't reason with savages. You could only fight them if they wanted to fight.

And Liddell, junior army officer on a frontier world, knew how to fight. He sent them reeling with thrusts of elbow and knee, clearing enough space to use his fists. He stood there with Laura-Jean for several moments in the middle of a churning circle, clearing it with flailing fists. They were closing in inexorably, though. At best he could earn for himself and Laura-Jean a few moments more of defiant freedom—and, he realized grimly, increased hatred from the crowd.

Yet he would not surrender. He had not come across thirty-five million miles of space to bend his knee before a pack of wild savages. He began to curse loudly and steadily when a missile struck Laura-Jean's forehead, bringing blood and sending the girl to her knees. A face leered close out of the background of homespun and coarse bodies, some of them bared to the waist in the strong afternoon sun. Liddell extended two fin-

gers of his right hand and thrust for the eyes, feeling the contact with suddenly yielding wetness, hearing the scream of pain. The face faded back, but others took its place. Liddell's fists split flesh, crushed cartilage, struck bone, with jarring impact which numbed his arms to the elbow. Blood smeared his fists. Blood—his own—stung his eyes, salted his mouth. He felt almost no pain, but they were striking back, pushing in on him. His left eye was swollen. He could barely see through it. Something had happened to his left arm. Tendons severed at the elbow or merely strained? he thought objectively. And then a great giant of a man, his face a mask of blood with skin split across his high cheekbone, drew Liddell's right arm up and back behind him. He stood quite helplessly and waited. If he moved, the arm would break.

The first blow drove him to his knees. The second sent him pitching over on his back, gasping at air which suddenly refused to be drawn into his lungs. The last thing he remembered was Laura-Jean's scream.

"... they won't treat you, Fred. They won't come near you." The words came, swim-

ming through blackness, through wraiths of fog, to him. "I did what I could, but it isn't much. Fred, I was so afraid..."

He opened his eyes. The voice was Laura-Jean's. He would worry about Laura-Jean later. Her voice indicated she was all right. He looked right and left, saw the thick log walls, the clay-filled chinks, the great wooden door, the packed clay floor. Stout wooden bars made a lattice at the high window of the room.

"Prison?" he asked.

"Prison," Laura-Jean said. "I've been listening to them talk outside. They don't know what to do with us. Each guard was afraid to help you, thinking his companions might see him do it and talk about it. All they've been doing is staying out there and keeping the mob away. It's as if they can't make up their minds about us."

"Why should they hate us so?" he demanded. He could move his left arm now, but it pained him. He became aware that he saw everything flat, two-dimensionally. His left eye was swollen shut. When he explored his face gingerly, he found a tender bruise on his left cheek.

"Why should they hate us?"

Laura-Jean echoed his words. "I don't know. If the mob has its way, we'll never find out."

For me it hardly matters, Liddell thought. I'm going to die anyway. Six months sooner or later, what's the difference? But for you. For you it's different, Laura-Jean . . . And it does matter, because savages or not, there are people here. They can survive here. If they can, the colonists on Venus can, too.

He stood up, walked on unsteady feet to the high window. If he stood on his toes and grasped the wooden bars with his hands—bringing the left one up slowly, painfully and surprised that it would function for him at all—he could see outside.

Lurid, watery light from the setting sun illumined the scene. The mob was very ugly, milling there. Torches had already been lit, spluttering and glowing against the gathering gloom. The mob had splintered into several groups, each listening to a frenetic speaker. Liddell wished he could hear the words, but they rolled and coalesced in a confusing babble of sound. The prison guards—half a dozen nervous, uncertain men, armed with nothing more deadly than clubs and daggers—stood below the window.

"They hate us so," Laura-Jean said. "They want to kill us." She repeated it, as if she could not quite believe her own words. "To kill us. Why, Fred? Why?"

Instead of answering her, Liddell said, "Someone's coming." He watched the mob outside part to admit a solitary figure. The man walked up to the guards and addressed them briefly in a voice which was lost in the noise of the crowd. Seconds later, Liddell heard a creaking sound as the huge wooden bolt which barred the door to their prison was lifted. The door opened ponderously, admitting the roar of the crowd in suddenly increased volume. Liddell heard phrases snatched by his ears from a maelstrom of sound.

"Kill them now . . ."

"Poisoners . . . almost destroyed this world . . ."

"Fool! Fool, let Croton's son talk with them."

". . . for trouble. Why else did they return?"

"Kill them!"

When the door was closed once more, the man said, "I am Howard Croton, son of the head man here. You realize, of course, it is only by my father's grace that you are alive at all."

At once, Liddell found himself hating the voice. It was too suave, too sure of itself. "What's the matter with you people?" he said, trying to keep his voice calm. "Is that the way you treat all strangers?"

"It is written that the monsters with hearts of black stone," Croton recited, as if the words had been drummed into him from his youth, "all but destroyed the Earth and then fled into the sky. It is further written that we have no conflict among ourselves, for is not conflict the way of the monsters who fled? But if the monsters return, then it is written that we direct our strength against them."

"Listen," Liddell said. "There's too much at stake for me to be polite about this fairy story of yours. I don't know who you are or how much power this father of yours has, but I demand that knowledge of our return to Earth is given to your highest authorities."

"You're in a position to demand nothing. However, there are no higher authorities."

"But I understood that your father ruled this one small village."

"That's right. There are

nothing but small villages like this all over Earth."

"No national governments . . ." Liddell began, amazed.

"I am here to offer you your lives," Croton said matter-of-factly. "My father and I agreed that you certainly would not come to Earth alone, not just the two of you. We are thus aware that a great force of your people must be lurking in the sky, preparing to strike."

Laura-Jean said, "But that isn't . . ." and let her voice trail off. Liddell had given her a warning glance. She had been on the point of telling the truth, that they were quite alone and could expect no reinforcements.

Liddell said, "And you want us to tell you when and where to expect them?"

"Right. For that information, your lives."

Their lives were hanging by a thin thread now, Liddell realized. The head man and his son, if their authority was respected, might be able to keep them from the mob's clutches for a while, but if they suddenly lost their value to the head man, what was left of their lives could be measured in hours.

"No," Liddell said. "Maybe we're going to die, but we

won't die traitors to our own people."

"Ah, then you admit it? They're coming?"

"I admit nothing."

"If you don't tell me—"

"All right, if I don't tell you—what? You came here because you're scared. All we have to worry about is our lives, and from the looks of things they're forfeit anyway."

"No, I can help you. I can save you. I can——"

"You say," Liddell told him calmly.

"The alternative is execution for you, in the morning. *If* the guards can keep that mob away from you tonight."

Liddell shrugged, wondering how far he could carry the bluff. "Then kill us," he said quietly, "for we'll tell you nothing. But remember this as your executioner strikes. If we die, you won't know when our people are coming, or where they'll strike, or—"

"Enough!" Croton shouted. "I came because my father and I thought the precaution worthwhile. But the chances of your people coming down on this very spot are slim indeed. A few miles in either direction and it won't be a problem for my father or myself, or our people. The land-

ing will be in another village, and——"

"Fool!" Liddell cut him short. "Do you think village boundaries or even old national boundaries matter to us? Do you think we'd be satisfied with the puny domain of your father? With a few hundred ignorant villagers? When we come in great numbers it will be to fulfill your legends—to take over the world or destroy it as we see fit."

The redness started at Croton's neck and crept up his face. His eyes were white slits against the livid skin as he said, "Then so be it. You'll die in the morning." And he turned angrily and strode to the door, rapping on it with his knuckles. Soon Liddell heard the great bolt creaking upward, saw the shaft of crimson sunset glow appear. Seconds later, he was alone with Laura-Jean again.

"Why didn't you accept his offer?" Laura-Jean wanted to know. "We could have told him a false story about when reinforcements could be expected. I don't like the idea of lying because these people will have to be told the truth some day, but if it means saving ourselves and returning to Venus to let our people know they can live on Earth . . ."

"No," Liddell said flatly. "It wouldn't work. He's the wrong person. He doesn't think we're going to survive. He thinks the mob out there is going to lynch us, no matter what we told him. And once we answered his questions, he wouldn't lift a finger to stop them. But we haven't answered his questions, Laura-Jean. Now he's wondering. Now he doesn't know if he can afford to let that mob have its way with us. He'll wonder—and maybe let us live."

"Maybe," Laura-Jean said. Her voice lacked depth and she was staring off into the distance, trying to pierce the thick log walls with her gaze, as if she could see what it would be like when the mob finally overpowered the half dozen guards and came for them.

"Maybe we'll live long enough to find a way of escaping," Liddell told her. "Hope is all we have now, Laura-Jean."

He walked over to her and kissed her, first gently, then fiercely and for a time, for a long time after that, the mob outside was forgotten. But one small part of Liddell's mind remembered. He had come to Earth thinking he had six months to live, and that

was bad enough. But now it might be six hours or six minutes or less—and not just Liddell, but Laura-Jean as well.

The sun was gone now, its afterglow barely purpling the western sky. The lights of torches held aloft here and there in the crowd cast leaping shadows on the log walls of the prison.

"Are you sure it's all right, sis?" Lonnie, Wendy's brother, wanted to know.

"I don't care if it's all right or not," Wendy admitted. "I know I should be at Howard's house to meet his family. I know they're expecting me."

"Perhaps they'll call off the betrothal. You wouldn't want that, would you, sis?"

"I don't know what I want. I only know I have to be here now, that's all. We have peace, Lonnie; but we have nothing else. The world is a grim, colorless place and maybe it was wrong many years ago when we had conflict, and maybe it was not. But at least, according to the legends, the conflict produced poetry and painting and music and an appreciation of these things."

"I don't see what this has to do with the people in the prison."

"I don't either," Wendy admitted. She had to shout in

order to be heard over the roar of the crowd. "But the two who came from the sky, the man and woman who came alone—doesn't it seem strange to you that if conquest was what they wanted they came that way, two people, unarmed, landing with fire and thunder so we could come and take them?"

"You heard what Howard Croton said to the crowd a couple of hours ago. The prisoners admitted they were an advance guard, Spies, he said. Spying and waiting for reinforcements to come and destroy us." Lonnie shuddered. "Sis, do they really drink human blood? That's what they are saying in the crowd."

"Hush, Lonnie. Anyway, you should be home on the farm."

"I brought the cart in to get some supplies. The shop was closed. I figured I'd wait until tomorrow."

"You brought that little cart, with a team of two fast horses, just to get supplies?" There was mock anger in Wendy's voice, but her eyes were soft and warm and smiling.

"Aw, I like to ride 'em fast, that's all. Pop said I could."

"Well, it strikes me as— Listen, Lonnie. Listen. Something's happening.

A tall heavy man with a blood-reddened bandage on the right side of his face, brandishing a flaming torch in his hand, mounted one of the small dog carts. All eyes in the crowd turned toward him, as if there was some magic in the way he moved or what he was going to say.

"It's Daggert!" someone near Wendy called.

"Daggert was fighting them at the skyship this afternoon. Daggert helped take them in."

"Hear Daggert!"

For the first time in hours, the roar of the crowd subsided. Speakers had demanded attention several times before, and milling knots of people had gathered around to hear their words, but the words were soon drowned in roars of approval and disapproval. For Daggert alone silence fell like a shroud on the mob around the log jailhouse.

"Maybe that's why I'm here," Wendy whispered to Lonnie. "Things are happening. New things, strange things—and frightening. But the rest of our lives is conformity and knowing what's going to happen. Howard and his family can wait. It's a terrible thing, what they're going to do. Lynch that man and woman, maybe. But don't you

see? It's different. It's unexpected. It's like you driving that team of fast horses just because you like speed. I've got to stay here, Lonnie. If Howard doesn't like it . . ." Wendy shrugged, and turned her eyes toward the huge flame-lit figure of the man Daggert, who was preparing to speak.

He had a deep, commanding, bellowing voice. He roared, "I tell you, we've waited long enough. You all know the legends. They've come here, those two, for only one purpose." He said what that purpose was. Death—or more monsters—for the survivors on Earth. Daggert himself was no monster. Many of them in the crowd were monsters, and of these, half had mutations more extreme than Wendy's. But they wouldn't listen to a monster. It had to be a normal man, like Daggert. Soon, after every few words, after every phrase, they were roaring. It was like magic, Wendy thought. He would raise his torch on high and silence them instantly with the gesture. He directed their formless, frenzied emotional orgy. He held it in the cup of his two great hands and molded it. He was a trouble-maker, a rabble-rouser—a

born leader in times of unexpected stress, who could bring grim, murderous order to hysteria.

"So I tell you," he concluded, "that unless we're all yellow and unfit to wear the name man, unfit to survive despite the worst efforts of the monsters who fled when the Earth was dying—unless we want to slink off to our hearths and cower there, trembling and afraid, waiting for the second and final coming of the Doom—unless all this, my friends, we have no choice but to batter down the prison door, drag out those two in there, and——"

Further words were unnecessary. Wendy could understand the crowd's actions, although she did not share their murder lust. This was the unexpected, coming to brighten their lives with the wild hot leaping flames of the totally strange.

Two heavy coils of rope were produced from somewhere, passed through the crowd from hand to hand until they reached Daggert. Several men trotted off in the direction of the village's one inn and soon returned with a heavy wooden bench fifteen feet long. Eager hands closed around the wooden planking, pounding feet churned the

soft dusty earth of the village's main street. The bench, an improvised but effective battering ram, struck the heavy door of the prison with a loud shattering sound.

The whole scene was almost dream-like, Wendy thought as she drifted through the crowd with her brother Lonnie toward the center of violence. The ram was carried back, borne forward with great speed, smashed against the door. The timbers shook, cracked, but held. Back went the battering ram, ready to strike again. For a moment, Wendy wondered about those two in there—waiting, cowering against the furthest wall, perhaps, for the end. Were they as evil as everyone said? She didn't know, but suddenly it was very important that she find out. She also didn't know why it was important, but this whole wild, unexpected evening, she had been governed by impulse. She would find out, she told herself, then realized it was impossible. In hardly more than minutes, those two in there, nameless, terrified, would be lynched.

The ram struck again, shattering the wood of the door. For a brief instant it seemed the door would hold for one more onslaught, but suddenly, as the ram was drawn

back, as the guards who had prevented the crazed crowd from reaching the huge wooden bolt and opening the door that way, scattered in all directions, fading into the crowd, the door tilted and crashed into the one large room of the prison. Holding their torches aloft, a dozen men streamed into the room.

For Wendy, time was suspended. Seconds had passed. Less than seconds. The crowd streamed out again, the man and the woman with them. It was going to be over now, so soon, so soon. And strangely, strangest of all on this wild night, the man did not seem afraid. Proudly almost, he had one arm about the waist of the woman and walked steadily forward with the roaring crowd, out into the torchlit night. Wendy found herself wishing he was afraid. Wishing he would yell and strike out blindly. Instead, it seemed that he was walking blindly forward, like a sheep to the slaughter.

But no . . . no . . .

His right hand moved swiftly, so swiftly she could hardly follow the blurring motion in the torch-light. He plucked one of the spluttering torches from a man near him, bellowed something which

Wendy could not hear, then swung the torch in a great arc over his head.

Wind whipped flame around in a circle so it seemed he held not a torch but a ring of flame above his head. He swung it like a flail, lowered the flail, swept through the crowd with it. There were screams of animal pain as men scattered in all directions. Two or three figures, burning brightly, torches themselves now, ran shrieking through the crowd, their hair afire, their clothing, their living flesh.

Incredibly, Wendy thought, he might do it. Might escape with his woman. But no, the way was not clear for him. It was half a mile and more to the skyship, and surely the crowd would close in on them, crush them with sheer weight before they could reach it.

The man was a grim terrible figure now. Wendy would remember him that way all her life, brandishing the torch, whirling it, his face awful to behold, his mouth open as if he was shouting but the sound lost in other shouts, other screams.

"Look out, sis!" Lonnie warned. "They're coming this way."

She stood there, transfixed. Lonnie was clutching her shoulder desperately, tugging

at her arm. "Sis, they're coming!"

"Lonnie! Where's the wagon? Where are the horses?"

"Why, just down the street, but . . ."

"Come on, hurry up!" Already, she was running, Lonnie, unquestioning beside her.

They reached the wagon, climbed aboard. Lonnie moved automatically for the reins, but Wendy thrust him aside and took them herself. "Up!" she cried. "Up, up!" The horses broke into a swift, ground - consuming gallop and the wind tore at Wendy's hair, her clothing, its cool exhilarating fingers dancing against her face.

"You're heading right back into the crowd!" Lonnie wailed.

She didn't hear him. Men ahead of them now were breaking wildly to right and left to avoid the thundering hooves of the two galloping horses. The wagon rocked and swayed, pitching from side to side.

Then, all at once, they had reached the man with the torch. He had cleared a circle now, and was keeping it clear with the swinging, spinning flame. But already his arm had slowed and soon, Wendy knew, he would drop the

torch from numb fingers and then the crowd would get hold of him.

She drew the reins back so hard that the two horses, already lathering, reared dangerously. She was dimly aware of Lonnie shouting soothing words to them. Their forelimbs hit the ground again and they stood there, pawing nervously.

"Climb on!" Wendy cried to the man. "Now, now while you still can."

He needed no second invitation. He hurled the woman up bodily and leaped aboard the wagon behind her. It was only then that Wendy, limp and half-conscious, gave the reins over to Lonnie and sank down weakly on the wood seat. "Take them to the sky-ship," she said and slumped there, spent, her head rolling forward on her chest.

After that, she was aware of motion, wild, surging, leaping, of the sway of the wagon and the wind-borne stink of the lathering horses. And voices, the man's and her brother's.

"I don't know what to say. I didn't expect . . . Thank you."

"Don't look at me. My crazy sister!"

"Then thank you, miss."

And the woman's voice. "Yes, thank you. . . ."

She was too weak to answer. She had hardly been aware of fighting off the half-seen figures when the wagon had stopped there behind them in the torchlight, but her arms were numb and she could feel blood seeping warm and wet from a gash in her side.

"They're blocking the way!" Lonnie cried. "We can't get through to the sky-ship."

"Try," Wendy said. She did not open her eyes.

"It's no use, miss." This was the voice of the man, roaring over the clatter of hooves and creaking of the wagon. "They have a barricade."

"Then turn around, Lonnie. Take them the other way. Take them to our farm."

"But sis! We can't!"

She said his name, once. "Lonnie——" The tone of her voice did it. She heard the horses whinnying, felt the wagon lurch wildly as the two animals reared again. Then there was a swaying motion as the wagon turned. Soon the rhythmic galloping motion rocked Wendy back toward unconsciousness.

Later—was it seconds, minutes—hours?—Lonnie cried:

"They're following us on horseback."

"Are we near the farm?" she asked him.

"Almost there. I don't know if we'll make it."

"Faster, Lonnie! Faster! It will be all right if we reach the farm. It is written that a man's territory, his personal property, is inviolate. They won't dare cross our border. And while these people won't be able to get away yet, they will have a chance to rest and think and plan."

She could hear horses' hooves now, other horses, many of them. She was glad, infinitely glad this had happened. She did not know why. She did not try to understand. That would only spoil the feeling she had, the feeling which said, clearer than any words, that she was living for the first time in her entire life. . . .

Closer came the horses' hooves. She could hear men shouting now.

"We're almost there!" Lonnie shouted.

"Are they crossing our border? It's marked, Lonnie. They can see it in the moonlight."

A pause. Her heart waited with that pause, not daring to beat. "No," Lonnie said finally. "They're reining up."

Here we are, Liddell thought two days later. On a primitive farm in a primitive village on a primitive world. Our lives are saved, for the moment. But they have the farm ringed around now. We can't leave it. We were rescued for nothing. Except to wait for death. . . . I guess I should be grateful to the girl and her brother, he thought. Without them, we'd be dead now—strung up to a tree somewhere. But still, there's nothing for us. Nothing. . . .

"You've hardly said a word in two days," Laura-Jean told him. "You just sit there. It isn't like you, Fred."

He growled an answer. Laura-Jean turned away as if she was going to cry.

Just then Lonnie came running into the room. His freckled face was animated with excitement, his voice breathless. "I came from town," he cried. "Sis says I should tell you what I told her. It's the skyship."

For the first time in two days, Liddell was interested. "What about the skyship?" he demanded.

"First all the kids from town went out there, throwin' rocks at it. The Monster, they call it. They keep throwin' stones at it and calling it The Monster."

"Their stones won't hurt it," Liddell said.

"But now the grownups are at it, too. They're trying to force the door and get inside. They're saying if they can get inside and mess things up, they'll be safe."

"The fools!" Liddell cried. "The blind, blundering, incredible fools."

Laura-Jean took his hand. "What can we do, Fred?"

"I don't know. But it's all over if they damage the ship so we can't blast-off. All over. Everything. I'm going out there."

"Fred, you can't. They'll kill you."

"I have to go. You see that I have to go, don't you?"

"I only know you'll be going to your death. I won't let you."

Liddell's smile was bitter. The words came out almost before he realized he was speaking them. "So what?" he said, unreasoning defiance in his voice. "I'm going to die anyway."

"What did you say?" Laura-Jean gasped.

"Nothing. I—"

"Tell me, Fred. I have a right to know."

"I'm going out there, that's all."

"You said you were going to—to die."

"Listen, Laura-Jean. Does it matter? All I can do is try."

"I want you to tell me."

"No you don't, Laura-Jean. I can't lie to you. Just don't ask me, that's all."

"Fred."

"All right, damn it. All right. It's radiation. That's why they sent me." As the words came out, he began to feel better. It was something you couldn't keep bottled up inside, because once the words were out you could forget about them and do what had to be done. "They said I only had six months to live."

"Oh, Fred. Fred, Fred..." Laura-Jean came to him. Her eyelids squeezed shut, the lashes dark and long. Two big tears rolled down her cheeks. "Fred, is there nothing we can do?"

"Radiation poisoning? No, nothing. Now forget it. You wanted me to tell you. Nothing's changed. I have to go out there and stop them."

Lonnie said, "They thought everyone on Earth was going to die of radiation sickness, my grandfather used to tell us. I can remember like it was only yesterday, but I was a very little boy then. My grandfather used to tell us how our biologists—"

"Later," Liddell snapped. "I'm leaving now. Lonnie, do

you think I'll be able to ride one of your horses? It's our only chance."

"For God's sake, be reasonable," Laura-Jean pleaded. "You can't go out there now, in broad daylight. Speed won't help you, Fred. Stealth will. If you wait for night——"

They argued the point back and forth hotly, but in the end she prevailed. It was, Liddell realized, the only way. Their one hope, and a slim one. *If* he could escape from the farm tonight without the ring of guards seeing him, and *if* he could reach the spaceship unseen, and *if* the villagers had not damaged the ship beyond repair, and *if* he could board it, fly back to the farm and pick up Laura-Jean, then humanity on Venus had a chance.

The hours of waiting were very slow and very bad. He watched the sun and began to hate it. He cursed the sun, sitting up there in the sky, apparently unmoving, in no hurry to sink below the horizon and summon night. The hours crawled on leaden knees. But towards late afternoon a dark overcast swept in from the west, and that helped. It meant darkness would fall sooner. It meant

the darkness, when it came, would be more complete.

In the hours of waiting, Lonnie wanted to talk to him, to tell him something. But he couldn't listen. Irritably, he would wave the boy away. In the last few hours of waiting, even Laura-Jean's presence annoyed him. Out there, not many miles away, what were they doing to the spaceship? Had they entered it now? Were they smashing the delicate mechanisms with heavy wooden clubs, mouthing prayers to their foolish, forsaking God?

And Laura-Jean said, "God's on our side, Fred. Oh, these people aren't bad, but they don't understand. God won't let our people be destroyed. I—I just know it."

He was too restless, too irritable, his mind could not remain long enough on one thought to argue. Perhaps there was a God. He didn't know. At the moment, he didn't care. What happened to him was not important. But if he could save their people, perhaps then he would believe.

Finally, night dropped its black obscuring cloak upon the face of the land. There was a threat of rain in the suddenly cool autumn air, and by the time Lonnie had darkened the exposed skin of his

face and hands with charcoal, the first big drops of rain had begun to fall.

"You better go on foot," Lonnie suggested. "A horse would give you away."

And, unexpectedly, Wendy said, "You can't go alone. You might get lost. It's a long way back to the village."

"But I can't ask either one of you to risk your life and come with me."

"All right," Wendy said, smiling. "Don't ask. I'll volunteer. I'll go with you, because someone must go."

"No. You've done enough for us already."

But Lonnie was already blackening his sister's face with charcoal. "Don't be angry with me, please," she told Liddell. "'Actually, I'm being selfish. I want to go. Suddenly, for the first time, my life isn't humdrum. For the first time, things are happening. Big things. Important things. I want to be part of them. Does that seem so strange?"

"No," Liddell said. "It doesn't seem strange. If you're ready, Wendy, let's go." He said good-bye quickly to Laura-Jean, shook Lonnie's hand. Then, with Wendy, he slipped away from the farm building into the wet night.

And after they were gone, Laura-Jean asked Lonnie:

"Your sister is in love with him, isn't she?"

"Yes," Lonnie said.

The knife at Liddell's belt scraped against the wet rocky ground as they crawled down the steep hill toward the shoulder of the road, making their slow way in the darkness among the graceful boles of mountain ash. It had been surprisingly easy leaving the farm, slipping out behind one of the posted sentries and moving quickly down the road before the man had executed another about face and headed back toward them. Then they had trudged in silence along the unpaved road which the rain quickly turned into a quagmire. After that, they had passed through the village boldly, because it was the shortest way. But no one had been out in the rain-drenched night. The yellow glow of oil lamps made pale golden squares against the night. There was the far off sound of laughter, of voices, of a woman singing from one of the wooden cabins. And there was no one abroad to stop them.

Now it was different. Now, crawling down the slope with Wendy, Liddell could see the muddy, rutted road below them lit by a hundred crim-

son torches. A hundred yards down the road to his left, a great bonfire was burning fiercely against the black night. And in front of the flames, silhouetted against them, its dark prow pointing up at the darker sky, was the spaceship.

His left leg, trailing, numb with wet and cold, struck something, dislodged it. A rock went rolling down the slope. He froze there, placed a hand on Wendy's shoulder. They listened to the sound the rock made, rolling and bouncing down to the road. They waited. There was no response. Dozens of figures stood around the bonfire, yelling, gesturing, waving their hands in the air. It reminded Liddell somehow of some obscene pagan rite which for millenia now had resided only in the dim ancestral memory of mankind.

"They didn't hear it," Wendy whispered.

Liddell nodded, realized the gesture was lost in the darkness. "Let's go," he said softly. Moments later, they reached the shoulder of the road. There they made their way along on hands and knees, stopping fifty yards short of the bonfire and half that from the spaceship. It seemed easy. Too easy.

All at once, Liddell groaned. He began to curse softly but very earnestly.

"What is it?" Wendy whispered.

"The airlock," he said.

"Airlock?"

"The door to the spaceship. It's on the other side. Between the ship and the bonfire. We'll never reach it without being seen."

At first, Wendy did not answer him. For a while he stood there listening to the sounds of wood crackling in the bonfire, of men shouting, of wood striking metal, as if, through the night, the people of the village were still trying to smash their way into the spaceship. And in time, Liddell thought bleakly, they would do it.

"It's terribly important to you, isn't it?" Wendy asked.

He realized that she had never asked that before. She had helped them escape the mob, had come back with him now, without knowing why. "Yes," he said, gripping her hand impulsively. "More important than I can tell you. Because you helped us, I guess you don't believe those legends about the people who went off to the sky. We didn't poison the Earth any more than you did. It was all of us, your ancestors and mine, together, in

our great evil. We managed to get away, that's all. But where we are now—we can't live. It's something in the air—radiation poison. Unless I can lead my people back to Earth, all of them will perish."

"And you. Lonnie told me. You're going to die of the radiation."

"You understand those things?"

"We had to. We forgot all about physical science and concentrated our best minds on the biological effects of radiation. We too would have died otherwise. Listen, please. I believe you. I'm not like these others. I don't know why, but I'm not. What I'm going to do now is for you. You understand?"

"What are you talking about?"

She hardly heard him, he realized. Almost, she was talking to herself now. "It might have been different for us, but it wasn't meant to be that way. Once, once briefly I was allowed to live, my life filled with newness and strangeness and wonder. You understand? It doesn't matter. It's for you . . . and your people."

"I still don't know—"

"Listen. I know you. You

have honor and pride. Soon you must make a decision. Remember that the fate of your people hangs in the balance. The decision you make must be the right one. I am known here and liked. I'll be all right. I will marry the head man's son, and soon the strangeness of these days will be forgotten by my people. Although I, I will never forget it." Abruptly, she pressed something into his hand. "Take this." She swayed toward him, kissed him full on the mouth. Then she let go of his hand and began running swiftly toward the spaceship—and beyond it. Toward the bonfire and the figures silhouetted against it.

She called in a loud voice: "It's me—Wendy. He's crazy, that man from the skyship. Crazy. I managed to get away, but he's after me. He's coming."

And the shouts:

"Where?"

"We'll kill him!"

"Show us, Wendy."

And Wendy: "Then follow me."

And she led them, Liddell saw, not toward where he was hiding, but off in another direction. His heart pounding wildly, he waited there in the rain, the rain which was falling harder now, streaming

down steadily on him, drenching him. If they found she was lying . . .

But she had mentioned the head man's son, the one who had spoken to him and Laura-Jean in prison. If the head man's son protected her, she would be all right. And a world needed saving—

Liddell thrust the small hard object Wendy had given him into a pocket of his jacket, gripped the knife in his right hand, and sprinted toward the spaceship.

He came all the way around the left side of the ship before he saw the three figures standing near the airlock, and when he did see them it was too late.

Hot blasts of air from the bonfire reached him through the rain. The flames began to smoulder now, smoking and hissing as the strong rain began to smother them. By the ruddy light which remained, though, he could see the three men. There was no retreating. They had spotted him. This was his one chance, his final chance, and he knew it.

"It's him!" one of them cried. "It's the one from the skyship."

Liddell recognized the booming voice, saw the bandage on the man's right cheek.

It was the man, Daggert he was called, who had led them into the prison, led the mob there to lynch them.

Waiting, balanced easily on the balls of his feet, the knife held low in his right hand, no higher than his thighs, Liddell watched them come for him. He did not think Daggert would be in front, and he was right. He knew Daggert's kind. Daggert was a rabble-rouser, but valued his own hide. Daggert would let his companions test the opposition first.

The lead figure lunged at Liddell awkwardly, his own knife drawn, his right hand raised with it over his shoulder. This one, Liddell thought with unexpected objectivity, has not been trained to fight with the knife. He waited, sidestepped easily, pivoted his body, grasping the man's wrist as he swung the firegleaming blade. Liddell went down swiftly on one knee and hurled the man, arms and legs flailing, over his head.

He barely had time to turn and face the second one. This man was better, very much better. He came for Liddell in a balanced crouch, the knife low at the level of his waist, held easily there, not gripped with strain-whitened knuckles, so he could thrust in either

direction. The thrust rose upward in a blur of motion, aimed for the tendons and great veins in Liddell's neck. When it was too late for the man to check himself, Liddell let his knees go limp and dropped swiftly to the ground. The man's knife sliced air over his head and for a brief moment the knife-wielder stood that way, awkward, vulnerable, arm outstretched.

It was a brief moment, but it was enough. Liddell shot upright and in a quick fluid motion of his right hand sank the blade of his knife into the soft flesh of the man's armpit. He regretted it. He had no fight with the man. The man was not Daggert. Daggert was different. Liddell would not mind killing Daggert at all.

The man screamed. Liddell wrenched the knife loose before the figure fell away from him. A spray of blood, warmer than the rain, squirted against Liddell's face.

It was then that the first man, the awkward one, crawling back through the darkness, tripped him.

He fell heavily, his right elbow striking against rock, the arm going numb. He was aware of the knife being hurled from his fingers, of

Daggert's wild triumphant bellow. The other man he did not see. He had eyes only for Daggert, who came plunging down at him. You don't save a world with sophistication and science, Liddell found himself thinking, the thought running wildly, ridiculously through his brain in the split second it took Daggert to reach him. You save it with violence or you don't save it at all—

At the last moment, Liddell rolled over on his side. He felt the blade of Daggert's knife scrape against his ribs, scalding like flame. He drove his knee up into Daggert's groin, two stiffened fingers of his right hand at Daggert's eyes. The big man twisted his head up, roaring, caught the fingers on his cheekbones harmlessly. As he swung the knife again, the other man came lunging for Liddell. Daggert's knife bit into flesh, but not Liddell's. The other man screamed, his voice bubbling with blood in his throat.

Liddell got to his feet, ran not for the spaceship but the bonfire beyond it. He needed time to operate the combination mechanism of the airlock. Daggert—alive—wouldn't give him time.

Through the darkness, he

heard shouts, the pounding of many feet running. The others were returning.

He reached the great fire, stood for a moment in its warmth, then plunged his hands toward the base of the flames, brought them out—scorched—with a brand.

He whirled to face Daggert. The man was in no hurry. He came for Liddell slowly, relishing the seconds, his knife ready. He did not consider the firebrand a weapon.

Liddell sighed. If Daggert had thought to throw the knife, Liddell would be finished. But Daggert wanted to sink it into Liddell's flesh with his own hand. Liddell waited until it was safe to wait no longer, then suddenly leaped

at Daggert and thrust the firebrand in his face.

Daggert screamed. His eyes went wide, unbelieving, in the split second before the flame enveloped them. His hair and his homespun shirt were afire. He beat huge hands across his chest and ran howling, a blazing torch, off into darkness. He took a dozen running steps and fell.

Liddell leaped for the spaceship. With numb fingers, he twisted the dials of the airlock mechanism. The shouts were closer now, but he did not turn to look. He felt the airlock door give suddenly. He tumbled inside the spaceship and slammed the airlock door behind him.

He was safe now. Some-



"I know, Froblsh. But if you closed your eyes . . ."

thing made him go to the one pane of quartzite in the fore-port which had not been fused entirely by their descent through Earth's atmosphere. It took a while before his eyes could make out the figures there in the fading firelight outside. Finally, he saw Wendy. She was standing with the head man's son, with Howard Croton. His arm was around her waist. She was sobbing, her shoulders wracked with the sobs. She had made her decision, and she would live. Happiness she would not know for a long time. But it was not given that everyone should be happy all the days of his life. Not given? thought Liddell. *Given?* By whom . . . I believe, he told himself incredulously. I believe in Him Who, after all, has not foresaken His people. . . .

A moment later, he lifted the spaceship and headed it for the farm where Wendy and her brother lived and where Laura-Jean was waiting for him.

Lonnie was very excited when Liddell returned. "Did she give it to you?" he asked.

"Give it to me—yes, she gave me something."

Lonnie was going to say more, but Laura-Jean was there then, and came into Liddell's arms, kissing him, holding herself close against him, crying but managing to say, "It's a cure for radiation poisoning. You're not going to die, Fred. You're not going to die."

"A cure?"

"They developed it, these people. It's why they didn't perish. Oh, Fred. . . ."

He walked back with her into the spaceship. They could remain on Venus, he thought, his people, because now, with what he had in his pocket, they could eliminate the radiation sickness, analyzing the drug, reproducing it. . . .

But they would not remain on Venus. It wasn't meant that the human race should form two splinter groups like that. Mankind would reunite again, the men of Venus bringing back the ways of science to the men of Earth, dispelling their foolish legends with the unalterable facts of history.

And together one day soon, not because they had to but because they wanted to, all of them might journey to the stars. . . .

THE END

DISSATISFACTION GUARANTEED

By JOHN TOLAND

*People will tell you that marriages are made
in Heaven. They may be right; but in Jason's
case all alterations were made in Hell!*

JASON ELLIOTT was a very lucky young man. Although only twenty-six, he was a promising junior executive at RRL & O, and was known in advertising circles as the one who started the trend towards blank verse in women's intimate wear.

Jason's wife, Julie, was very beautiful and completely in love with her talented husband. Yet at that moment, which was ten minutes after two a.m., he was saying to himself as he nibbled on a chicken neck in the kitchen, "What did I ever do to deserve such a stupid wife?"

Julie called to him in a

sweetly impatient voice from the bedroom, "Aren't you ever coming to bed, honey-bunny?"

Jason sighed. Honey-bunny! Ugh! It had taken him a year to break her of the habit of calling him sweetie-pie. He sighed again. For he had almost died of mortification earlier that evening when they were backstage at the close of the Equity Library Theatre production of GHOSTS. One of their friends had played the lead and was still panting from the exertion of asking his mother for the sun.

"Morty," Julie had said to the exhausted actor, "I thought you were simply love-

ly. But that Isben wrote the dulllest mystery play I ever saw."

"Honey-bunny!" called Julie, "your little cotton-tail is wait-ing!"

That was another thing, thought Jason attacking a battered chicken wing which, unbeknownst to him, had been turned down by the dog the day before. Sex was essential, but she acted as though Congress were going to pass a law against it at any minute. Enough was really enough, especially with that new beer jingle he had to knock out by Monday.

"Jay, boy!"

"What the hell can I do about her!" he muttered to himself.

There was a slight puff of smoke and a pleasant-looking middle-aged man in a pin-striped suit stood in front of the refrigerator. "You called, my boy?"

"What the devil!" gasped Jason.

"Ah, I see you know me."

"You—you mean you're really——"

"Well," confessed the ruddy cheeked man, "not *the* Devil but *a* devil."

"How did you——"

"We're on twenty-four hour call."

Jason shook his head dazed-

ly. "I . . . must be dreaming. You're a mirage."

The devil smiled good-naturedly and picked up a cigarette from the pack on the kitchen table. As it touched his mouth it burst into flame. "They're milder too," remarked the devil slyly.

"I'm—not dreaming?"

The devil blew a neat ring of smoke into the young man's face. Jason coughed as his visitor spoke.

"This is all quite on the up and up. You may have the usual three wishes, you know. Please keep them on the personal level," he said in the tone of one who is talking by rote. "I'm not qualified to grant epic wishes such as a) the outlawing of the 'H' bomb or b) the general use of phonetic spelling."

"But it's fantastic," said Jason who ordinarily believed nothing unless it appeared in *The Herald Tribune*. "I thought you—eh—devils were only conjured up by drawing a pentagram or——"

"My dear boy," cut in the devil with a show of testiness, "the use of the pentagram has been frowned on for some time. Ever since that building down in Washington gave it such a bad name."

"The name of the building in Washington," said the sus-



Julie had changed, all right—for the worst!

picious Jason, "is The Pentagon."

"Pentagon, pentagram, pentacost, it's all the same. Believe me, these superstitions about hensbane and so on are merely collections of old wives' tales."

"I think you're a fake," said Jason icily, for he disliked the unorthodox in anything. "You're some drunk who just walked in here when I wasn't looking and——"

The devil disappeared and then materialized a moment later sitting on an invisible chair six feet off the floor. He blew another ring of smoke which hung over Jason's head like a halo. "You were complaining about your wife when I was passing by. Perhaps you'd like to try a little wish on her. Give her red hair or something?"

"I . . . I . . ." stammered Jason. "You really *are* Beelzebub after all!"

"*Beelzebub*," corrected the devil superciliously, still smarting over the pentagram incident. "But I am not Beelzebub. I mean Beelzebub. He's big brass. Hasn't been out in the field for a hundred years. My name is Johnson. I'm only a noncom. I'd have been commissioned long ago if I wanted to play politics

but I always . . . Well, that's beside the point."

"But if I take your three wishes," said the quick-thinking Jason, "that means I've got to give you my soul."

Johnson laughed jovially, a little too jovially, the junior executive thought. "Souls are a dime a dozen, my boy. Actually, you sold your soul to the Devil before you got out of High School."

"Why, I never——"

"No arguments, please. It's all down in black and black." He smiled his salesman's smile. "This is merely part of our new good-will campaign. We've been getting bad publicity lately and higher ups. . . ." He smiled. "That is, our lower-downs want the public to get the facts, the real facts about us. Yes, sir. Absolutely no money down. You're not obligated in any way. No promissory notes. It's a sort of a free introductory offer. You might call it a free home demon-stration." He looked eagerly at the young man. "Demon-stration," repeated Johnson.

"I got it the first time—unfortunately," said Jason, who made it a point to laugh at no one's jokes but his own.

"Pardon the levity. But I like my clients to feel at home. My regular customers

all call me the Friendly Fiend. Yes, I always say, I like to make whatever world I'm in a happier place and——"

"Can we get down to earth for a minute," cut in Jason.

Johnson descended suddenly, waiting for the laugh that never came.

"You *can* do something about Julie. Don't get me wrong now. I love her very much and she has some wonderful qualities but I do wish she was brighter. *Were* brighter. She's always embarrassing me with my cultural friends. Why, only the other day, a poet friend of ours asked her what she thought of Kafka. And she said, 'Oh that Turkish stuff is so syrupy. I prefer *Chock Full O' Nuts*.'" "

"I see" Johnson nodded his head understandingly. "But she does have a nice pair of ankles."

"That reminds me of another thing." Jason lowered his voice confidentially. "This is rather embarrassing, but sexually speaking——"

"More or less?" asked Johnson with the clinical tone of a nurse who is about to put a thermometer in an odd place.

"Less."

"Well!" Johnson looked up from his little black notebook with surprise. "I must say——" He shrugged his

shoulders. "Frankly, I think you've got something pretty nice in there: a sweet, loving good-natured, not so bright, beautiful girl. One would think she'd be a great comfort."

"Do you usually inflict your opinions on your customers?"

"Just trying to be helpful, me boyo. Any more changes? Physical perhaps? Like a fuchsia hair?"

"Fuchsia hair, my God!"

"Uhuh, I'm sorry. Thought I was in the Pleiades for a minute. And, son," he added in a hurt tone of voice, "I'd appreciate it if you'd watch your language around me. I'm a little sensitive about certain three letter words."

"While you're at it," said Jason thoughtfully. "You might trim about three inches off her hips."

"Three inches!" cried Johnson. "Off those delightful hips?"

"Make it four inches," was the icy retort. "And if you're serious about this whole thing, let's see some results."

"You'd think you were paying for this," grumbled Johnson.

"When do all these changes take place?"

"Immediately. Call your wife in," said the ruddy-cheeked man. "But before you

do, I'd better go. I'll be searching you," he said hopefully as he began to disappear.

"A comic devil yet," groaned the unimpressed Jason as he watched Johnson slowly fade away. Then he cleared his voice and called, "Julie, Julie, will you come here, please,"

There was a pause. In a moment a very beautiful girl (a little too thin around the hips, perhaps) came into the room. "You called me, Jason?" she asked in the cultured tones of a head librarian.

"Y-your voice," stammered Jason. "What quality, what timbre, what enunciation!"

"What are you about talking?"

Jason seized the girl's hands. "Dear Julie, you didn't want to end your sentence with a preposition! Your voice is so Bostonian. I can't believe my eyes!"

"That's a ridiculous statement," said the lovely girl sternly. "One hears with one's ears."

Jason smiled for Johnson had obviously straightened out her syntax. "I'm astounded. For you just to calmly walk in here and——"

"Jason, would you kindly stop splitting infinitives

around me. It's quite harrowing."

The young man pulled the girl onto the sofa. He looked in her eyes with new love. "Do you still think Bernard Shaw is Artie's kid brother?"

Julie moved away from him, sitting primly with her hands in her lap. "Shaw, George Bernard. Irish wit and man of letters.. Started career as music critic and author of unsuccessful books. His plays include: *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Arms and the Man*, *Candida*, *Fanny's First Play*, *Androcles and the Lion*. . ."

Fifteen minutes later, after she had made a complete list of all of Shaw's plays, including a capsule resume of her favorite, *Man and Superman*, he put a softly restraining finger on her full lips as she began to discuss the various prefaces.

"Darling, darling, this is all too good to be true."

"*Too True to be Good* was written in——"

"Not now, dearest heart." He looked into her deep, intelligent eyes and his soul swam in contentment. At last he had someone to talk to. "It's getting late now. Let's hit the sack." He bit her left ear playfully.

"That could become a dangerous habit," admonished the

girl rising to her feet. "The aural organs are outwardly hardy but inwardly extremely delicate."

He seized one of her hands. "You little devil," he hissed trying to draw her towards him.

"Jason, I know exactly what you need."

"Yes, yes," he said amorously.

She floated towards the bedroom and he followed her eagerly. She turned as she entered the bedroom. "What you need is a good cold shower. Then you'd better sleep on the sofa. Good evening." She closed the door and there was an ominous click of the lock.

"But dearest sweetie pie!" protested Jason. "Hasn't my honey-bunny forgotten something?" He pounded on the door. "I say, haven't you forgotten something?"

The door opened and Julie's coldly intellectual face appeared. "Here is everything you need, Jason." She handed him a pillow and two blankets.

But Julie was wrong. It was unexpectedly cold that night and he could have used another blanket.

During breakfast the next morning in their pretty little aqua split-level ranch house with the large picture win-

dow, Jason was treated to a fiery discourse on the advantages of Kant over Berkeley.

It had all started when Jason, who always read *The Herald Tribune* at breakfast, had remarked concerning a statement contrary to his beliefs, "Pure cant." Unfortunately he came from Newton, Mass. and his "cant" came out a little on the broad side.

When Jason tried to get in a word edgewise, he was overwhelmed by Julie's erudite fund of information on pragmatism. It was only by pantomime, at which he was very clever, that he managed to get his second cup of coffee. The junior executive was disturbed as he was given a birdlike peck on the cheek at the backdoor of the aqua house, which in spite of its color still looked like a three-car garage. Usually Julie smeared several square inches of Desire Under The Elms Number Two all over his face. Perhaps he had been hasty to ask that devil. . . .

That devil! How insane could one get! This was the Twentieth Century. Such things didn't happen in Fair Haven, N. J. There was probably a Borough ordinance against it, he thought with a wry smile. But when he recalled the amazing change in

his wife's mind and form, the smile vanished. There had to be a devil. There was no other explanation for it. Well, it would undoubtedly work out as soon as he got used to the idea of having an intellectual wife. He laughed thoughtfully as he watched one of his neighbors kissing his wife at the back door of a cerise, split-level ranch house with a big picture window. Wouldn't old Harry be surprised that night at the Officer's Club dance when Julie started spouting Shakespeare!

But Harry was more than surprised. Harry and Belle were riding with the Elliotts to the Fort Monroe Officer's Club. All the men in their crowd were reserve officers and they enjoyed the privileges of the golf course and the club house. They also enjoyed putting on their uniforms several times a year on official occasions so they could be saluted. Harry, in particular, was fond of this homage. Whenever he put on his fading captain's bars he would go in and out of the main gate of the Fort itself, overworking the right arms of the alert M.P.s.

Harry was sitting in the back seat with Julie. It was a custom that had held over from a New Year's party for

the couples to change partners for the usual Saturday night's harmless fun. Harry was boasting to Julie of the new paint his company had just developed. It repelled rain, snow and pigeons.

"Oh, yes, I know," cut in Julie repelling a surreptitious pinch. Then she rattled off the formula of the new paint.

"Hey!" Harry was so startled he didn't try a second pinch. "Who the heck told you?" He poked Jason who was driving. Naturally the car was a two-toned station wagon with the name *Forest Murmurs* tastefully embossed on the door. "How come she knows? Did some one leak to you?"

"Why I . . ." Jason gulped. Was there anything she didn't know? He saved the situation by hitting a railroad crossing at seventy-five miles an hour. Harry bumped his head on the ceiling and forgot all about paint formulas.

The evening was one Jason would rather not remember. Julie had always been the most popular girl in the set because she loved to dance, laughed easily at anyone's jokes, listened to all the men she danced with, and never tried to flirt too openly with the other girls' husbands.

But before the first bottle of rum had been downed, she took command of the conversation at the table for twelve with a loud and accurate description of the Quantum Theory. A German scientist, who was a civilian worker at one of the laboratories, overheard, since he was in the same room, and joined the party. Then he and Julie got into a hot, bitter argument on rocket propulsion. The scientist insisted that the Faster-Than-Light Drive was a wild impossibility. But Julie proved by lipstick diagrams on the tablecloth that the scientist was not only a fool but a bigot. Three colonels, a warrant officer and several more guttural civilians were attracted to the large table where Julie was demonstrating with an empty rum bottle, a silk handkerchief and a rubber band her new theory of the Osmotic Drive. Before long, Major Fish, who was in charge of the Club, pulled Jason aside.

"Elliott, old man," he said in a confidential tone. "I think your wife has had one too many. Would you mind taking her home before she starts a riot? Several colonels' wives are looking ugly."

Jason, though blushing with embarrassment, was never

one to be cowed by a major's leaves, since he had been a second lieutenant. "Yes, sir," was his fiery retort. If he hadn't been a gentleman he would have added, "What colonel's wife isn't?"

"One other thing, Elliott." The major lowered his voice in the manner of one officer telling another his fly was open. "I noticed your wife fraternizing with the bartender's helper." He shook his head. "He's a corporal. Can't have that sort of thing, y'know."

The Elliotts drove home alone for Harry had no desire to sit in the backseat with the Encyclopedia Britannica.

"Well, you really made a mess of things," growled Jason as their tires rasped angrily on the gravel driveway of the Club.

"Stupid!" commented Julie.

"What do you mean stupid? You've been going with that crowd for five years without thinking they were stupid."

"Oh, I meant that dense Eberhardt. He calls himself a scientist and he didn't even know the distance to Mercury. Missed by 5000 miles!"

"Major Fish told me you were fraternizing with an enlisted man," said Jason stiffly.

"Oh, you mean that nice

boy drying the cocktail glasses?"

"Yes, that pimple-faced draftee."

Julie angrily flounced to the other end of the seat. "That pimple-faced boy is the only one around here who ever read all of *Remembrance of Things Past*!"

Two nights later Jason was raiding the refrigerator. It was two in the morning and he half expected to hear Julie calling him to hurry into bed. Then he remembered that he now slept on the sofa and she had no interest whatever in his nocturnal habits.

He bit into a piece of cold meat-loaf. It tasted quite a bit like one of his old treasured childhood toys. Julie was so busy reading she rarely got meals any more. He winced when he thought of the evening he had just gone through. They had invited the crowd over to play charades and twenty questions. But Julie spoiled everyone's fun by answering all the questions and guessing all the pantomimes almost immediately. Then while they were listening to their half hour of classical music (this crowd had an intellectual project at each of their gatherings) Julie would tell them all about the com-

poser and explain the mechanics of the music. When conversation, in retaliation, swung to boxing, Julie first charmed the men by relating accurately the good points of the current welterweight champion. But when she proceeded to dissect every welterweight since the days of bare knuckles, another pall settled on the group. And to make matters completely dismal, she had prepared no food since that day she had devoted to writing a paper on Swedenborg.

"What the devil can I do?" grumbled Jason.

"You called for Broom Service," joked Johnson appearing in the sink with his legs folded under him.

"It's about time you came back," Jason complained.

"I've been making door to door calls lately. Terribly tied up. Anyway . . ." He smiled. "We always like to give our customers several days to try out the product so all the bugs are worked out."

"You've got to do something. She's simply intolerable. My God!"

"Uhuh, watch your language, son."

"Do you know what she's done?" Jason spent a half hour complaining.

"Well, I think I warned

you, my boy. Too much knowledge in a woman can be quite wearing. You want her back to normal?"

"Ah—no. I'd still like her to be an intellectual companion to me. But I don't want her to know *everything*. I want to be mentally superior in some things."

Johnson scribbled a note in his book. "Know some things," he mumbled, "But not *all* things." His legs disappeared.

"Hey, just a moment. There is something else."

"Yes?" Johnson smiled as his legs reappeared.

"When I said she was a little too—well, you know—on the amorous side before, I didn't mean to—well, you know."

Johnson glanced at the blankets on the sofa and winked broadly as he made another note.

"And I think I was wrong about the hips."

"Back to normal?"

Jason nodded. "And you might even give her a little more up here." He gestured towards his chest.

"If you say. Personally I think the male desire for large breasts in their women is an indication of the Oedipus Complex."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd

keep this on an impersonal basis," said Jason coolly.

"Well, if you want me to be really impersonal. . . ." With a snap of his fingers he instantly vanished.

Jason meticulously washed his hands in the sink and then went into the living room. He walked to the bedroom door and knocked. "I wonder," he thought, "if the changes start now or tomorrow morning?"

He got his answer almost immediately. The door flew open and Julie, her eyes as bright as a squirrel's, leaped at him.

"Jay, honey-bunny!" She took off her negligee which had hid little in the first place. Johnson had certainly outdone himself in the physical department, thought Jason approvingly. "I thought you were never coming to bed, sweetie-pie!"

Jason went to the bedroom door. She had to be taught a lesson first, he decided. "Good night," he said closing the door and then locking it.

"But, Jay boy!" called the distressed girl from the living room.

"See, how *you* like the sofa!" he shouted.

The sounds of the boisterous party next door drowned out Julie's frustrated sobs.

Jason let the heavy breathing Julie sleep until three the next afternoon. She must have been exhausted by the changes made in her, he surmised.

When she finally opened her weary eyes and saw her husband staring down at her, she smiled and pulled him to the sofa.

"You're not mad about last night?" he asked with mild wonder.

"You're too cute to get mad at," she said ruffling his hair. Then she flung her arms around him in a long kiss.

Quite a while later while Jason was fixing breakfast for the tired girl, he was congratulating himself on the new changes he had brought about. And still later while they were getting dressed for the Shipwreck Party at the Yacht Club he amused himself by asking her a series of questions. Although she could tell him everything Dostoevsky had written with a critical analysis of each work, the only reaction she had when he mentioned the name Mark Twain was to whistle, "Whoo, whoo."

"Stop acting silly," he said. "Certainly you know who Mark Twain is."

"I never heard of him before," said the girl candidly. "And stop lisping."

Jason sighed. Johnson was either a slipshod devil or one with a misplaced sense of humor. "Pass me the cigarettes, please," he said resignedly.

"What the devil are cigarettes?" she asked naively.

They went to the Shipwreck Party by themselves since they had been pointedly left out of all the plans made by the crowd. But Jason wasn't worried. The gang would soon discover the new, amiable Julie and things would be better than ever. Just as Jason was pasting on a beard which was supposed to make him look like Captain Kidd, the doorbell rang. He looked out the window and saw Benson, their next door neighbor. He had never spoken much to Benson because he didn't like him. His clothes were too loud and he threw noisy parties like the one the night before.

"Yes?" said Jason in as dignified a manner as possible with half a beard on his chin.

"Hiya." A red-faced man holding a large bottle of beer smiled tipsily at him. "How're you fixed for blades?"

"You wanted something?"

"Yeah. We want Dimples. Tell her the party is starting all over again."

"There is no Dimples here," said Jason coldly.

"You know who I mean. The cute little blonde trick with the super-cargo. Your wife's sister."

"My wife's sister?" said the puzzled Jason. "Why my wife doesn't have . . ."

"She said her name is just plain Dimples. Don't try to fool me, brother," said the red-faced man shaking a gently admonishing finger. "She looks exactly like your wife. Except for the super-structure."

"You—mean she was at your party last night?" gasped Jason.

"Was she at the party? Wee-wow-wee! She *was* the party last night. That little kid is the one who put the 'art' in party. And cle-ver! She knows how to mix every kind of cocktail in the book. And what a kidder. She pretended she never heard of the multiplication table. And then did my big girl's calculus homework in her head."

"I'm sorry, she's not here." Jason started to close the door.

"But we want Dimples. Everybody wants Dimples."

"Dimples has gone back to upper New York State to the Home."

"The Home?"

"She's not a well girl."

"Gee, and she looked so

healthy last night. Just goes to show you." The red-faced man leered and then asked in a huskily confidential voice, "How the hell did you happen to marry the skinny one?"

Jason closed the door. No wonder Julie hadn't been able to get up until three in the afternoon.

He was still moody as they drove towards the Yacht Club.

"What's the matter, honey-bunny?" asked Julie. "You're so quiet. You haven't even told me how I looked." She snuggled up close to him and blew on his neck.

"Look out, you'll make me have an accident."

"Oh, *do* let's have an accident." After a pause, she asked, "How do I look?"

"You look fine," he said tersely. She had cleverly made herself up like a palm tree. But he didn't approve of her scanty trunk. When the jealous Jason tried to move away from her, she kept good-naturedly following him until she had wedged him against the door. Then she began taking liberties with him which were against the Motor Vehicle Laws of New Jersey. That they arrived safely at the Yacht Club was a tribute to the driving ability of all those who passed them on the road.

The Shipwreck Party, which grew drunker and more untamed every year, was the annual feature of the yachting season. It was the one evening when the inhibited lost their inhibitions and the uninhibited were accepted as normal. There was only one feature of the party that Jason could look back on with any pleasure. And that was the fact that Julie kept her mask on and nobody recognized her. It was practically the only thing, he acidly told her at a later date, that she did keep on.

As long as he was around, she clung to him amorously but if he left her a minute he had to search the dark nooks of the club or the shrubbery outside to find her.

"Don't you think you'd better dance with me?" he said bitterly after one of these excursions when he went out on the dock and found her in a rowboat with a local councilman.

"This your girl?" asked the borough father. "Boy, I never met anyone like her," he said as the two climbed out of the bobbing rowboat.

"I'll bet not," said Jason.

"Would you believe it? She knows the lifetime batting average of Honus Wagner!"

"Isn't this a scrumptuous

party, honey-bunny?" said the happy girl as she was yanked unceremoniously up the dock.

"You smell like you've been drinking hair oil made with sheep-dip."

"Hey, palm tree," called a drunken middle-aged woman who was wearing a barrel punctured with a large peep-hole. "Which way to the Ladies Room?"

"Ladies Room?" repeated the puzzled girl.

"Yeah, my hoops are slipping."

"Ladies Room?"

"It's over that way, the other side of the bar," directed Jason. When the lady in the barrel had gone, Jason turned to his wife. "Are you so drunk you've forgotten where the Ladies Room is?"

"What's a Ladies Room?" she asked innocently.

"Stop kidding. Everybody knows what a Ladies——" Then he remembered Mark Twain and the cigarettes. "Oh, my God, not that!"

"I feel a little funny from all the punch I drank," she said with an odd smile.

Jason groaned. "Hurry up. This way." He silently cursed Johnson as he led her into the club house and past the bar. He pointed to a door marked WAVES. "Go in there."

"What for?" asked Julie.
"Who needs waves?"

The middle-aged lady with the barrel came out of the door.

"Would you mind helping my wife? She's a little dizzy," said the embarrassed Jason.

"I'm a little dizzy myself. Come along, shipmate," said the lady taking the puzzled Julie by the hand.

A few minutes later, Julie came out with a Mona Lisa smile on her face. "Hey, Jay, honey bunny," she whispered as she giggled like a school-girl. "Do you know, the funniest thing happened on my way to . . ."

But just then a huge Conga line cut between them and by the time Jason could duck under the wild chain of screaming people, Julie had disappeared.

Realizing that lightning often strikes twice in the same place, he hurried out to the dock. As he pushed open the screen door he heard a wild pounding of feet on the wooden dock.

"Wait for Cotton-tail!" cried a happy voice that could belong to no one but Julie.

"No, oh, no! My wife!" panted a fat man who was only a few feet in front of the pursuing girl.

"Julie!" shouted Jason as

quarry and quarrier neared the end of the dock.

There was a splash and then a disappointed voice said, "I only wanted to play scrabble with you."

Jason ran down the dock and seized his wife. "We've got to get out of here," he hissed. "That was the Commodore you just chased off the dock."

"Hadn't you better pull him out?" said the girl pointing at the struggling figure in the shallow water.

Jason pulled her away. "If he can't swim, he had no business letting himself get elected Commodore."

"Oh, rabbit boy, you're so virile!" said the girl wrapping her arms lovingly around him.

"We're going home."

"And that's the best place for bunnies to go," she said in a sultry tone of voice as she pinched him familiarly.

An hour later, when Julie was safely asleep in the bedroom, Jason tiptoed to the kitchen.

"Now, where the devil are you, Johnson?"

"I've been waiting for you," said the devil stepping out of the refrigerator without bothering to open the

(Concluded on page 130)



BY THE READERS

Dear Editors:

Just finished reading the latest *Amazing*, and again I have come to the realization that something is wrong.

First of all, you ought to have a letter section. You never should have dropped the one you had when the mag changed size, and I've missed it.

And now, on the general gripe: William Morrison's "Battle-ground" and Ivar Jorgensen's "Blessed are the Murderous" were the only tales that I thought worth reading.

And I think nostalgically of the *Amazing* mags of a year ago with Sturgeon, Bradbury, and Heinlein—all in the same issue. What in the universe happened?

I'll name a few: "A Way of Thinking" by Sturgeon, "Project Nightmare" by Heinlein, "The Day the Gods Fell" by Jorgensen, "The Invaders" by Leinster, "Little Girl Lost" by Mathe-son, "So Wise, So Young" by Doar, and "Turnover Point" by Coppel. Where have stories like these gone lately?

In those days you even had tinted illustrations! In those days you had the best writers in the field, and you had them often.

Lately it seems you're lucky if you can get ahold of a story by Sheckley or Dick—a couple of guys that play just about every mag in the field. Well, I suppose, almost every mag.

And that constitutes my gripe: "What happened to this mag?" I don't know the answer, but I hope you do.

Lundumdahl Farbles,
Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

● *Sure, L. F., we'll tell you why the days of tinted illos and several of the top authors in each issue are no longer with us: Not enough readers will buy the magazine to justify the tremendous costs involved. It was your editor's argument that a magazine containing the best of everything in the science-fiction field—best paper for best reproduction of the best artwork illustrating the best stories, plus the use of color—would bring a couple of hundred thousand steady readers every issue. We were wrong—and the figures were not long in arriving to prove us wrong. Sure, circulation mounted—but nothing like it had to to justify the expense involved. We stuck to our guns as long as we could; but the day arrived when retrenchment was in order. We hated to back down; but in view of the circumstances it would have been foolhardy not to. We did manage to keep the story quality high—although the so-called big names appeared less regularly.—ED.*

Mr. Browne:

Am very pleased to read of the return of a readers' column in *Amazing Stories*. If conducted right (edited properly), such a column becomes an asset to any magazine, be it comic book, pulp, digest, or slick magazine, or trade journal. And science-fiction magazines can build up a very good reputation with a good readers' section. So I wish you a lot of success with it.

A note here too, I particularly like what may be your change in the Jan. issue toward longer stories, rather than a large number of short stories as you had in the previous issue, for instance. It seems to provide a better balance to the whole, although I admit I do prefer the longer stories rather than the short ones.

Wishing you continued success.

Franklin M. Dietz, Jr.,
156 West Main Street,
Kings Park, L. I.,
New York,

● *Our way of conducting the readers' page is to print all letters as written, answering each of them. If the writer kicks us in the teeth unjustly, we'll kick back; if he has a logical gripe, we'll say, "You're a hundred percent right, Mac," and do something about correcting the fault. Okay?—ED.*

My dear Mr. Browne:

You are to be commended for your selection of W. Nicholas Earle's "Never Let the Left Hand," in your November issue. It was quite thought-provoking.

You may be interested to know that the story is more "science" than "fiction." Several years ago my teen-age son became afflicted with an "incurable" malady . . . a disturbance of his organs of secretion, controlled entirely by the subconscious. The medical profession advised that "we make the best of it." I came to the same conclusion that Mr. Earle's story indicated, namely: if the conscious mind cannot function properly or does not function to the complete satisfaction of the individual, why not educate the subservient frontal lobe in which rests all autonomous results of the stimuli of the central nervous system? My approach, however, was through hypnosis, and it was eminently successful.

Please understand that I am not a professional psychologist. My methods would make Freud turn over in his grave. And I have never charged one dime, nor do I intend to. My income is more than sufficient to indulge my hobby of helping those who have been "given up as a lost cause" by the medical and psychiatric professions.

As an example, an architect in Washington, D. C., a dear friend of mine and an eminent personality whose name is a household word among the nation's architects, was suffering from bronchial asthma and had been for forty years. Through twelve hypnotic sessions, his subservient frontal lobe was raised to a more dominant level of consciousness and the choking ceased, along with the accumulation of bronchial fluids. Another: a little girl, eleven years old, was afflicted with tremors of the right arm. Because of a breach birth, she suffered from cerebral palsy, hence the continual tremor. Inquiry showed that the tremors ceased during sleep. "If this is the case," I thought, "then the subconscious mind, with proper, post-hypnotic suggestion, will stop the tremors." It did. I reported my findings to the medical authorities, and was promptly labeled a "quack—a charlatan." Though why someone would practice charlatanry without fees of any kind—directly or indirectly—was not explained.

Sexual problems respond very well to hypno-therapy also. A woman, wife of an M.D. friend of mine, had *never* had an

orgasm in all her twenty-eight years of married life. Under hypnosis, she was given the suggestion that she would experience an orgasm each and every time she experienced marital relations, and that each experience would be more erotic than its predecessor. Needless to say, the suggestions were successful, and I might add, a divorce was averted.

The use of hypnotic suggestion to educate and induce the central nervous system, which has its seat in the brain, to utilize alternative nerves and muscles is another form of hypno-therapy than the widely known utilization for psychic, character disorders. In the former case, paralytics, epileptics, and those suffering from chronic constipation, insomnia, impotence, etc., have been either helped enormously or cured.

I do not speak of a cure in the sense that it is used by the medical profession. I do speak of a condition which parallels a cure, though, through the use of alternative nerves and muscles which enable the subject to live with himself or herself happily.

Returning to Mr. Earle's excellent story, I will experiment with his theory on ambidexterity, and I do not believe I will have any difficulty in writing, simultaneously, backwards and upside down. I have been interested in (and practicing) auto-suggestion, or self-hypnosis, for some five years, and with my system I can see no reason why this cannot be accomplished in a few months. In fact, I have taught my friends the so-called "secret" in a few weeks and their own feats would amaze even Mr. Earle.

Henry D. Spalding,
320 North Ardmore Ave.,
Los Angeles 4, Calif.

P. S. I would be glad to answer any question you may receive from your readers on the subject of hypnosis and its application to therapy, at no charge whatsoever. Questions regarding sexual problems can only be sent to married adults.

● *We publish this letter only as of possible interest to our readers. Mr. Spalding's comments and opinions are his own, and we neither approve nor disapprove of them.—ED.*

Dear Sirs:

You asked for letters—so here goes!

There is something missing from the pages of *Amazing*

Stories, just what this something is can be determined by looking at a back issue previous to the change to digest size. The personality that so long lived with *Amazing* is gone. Sure you say the Observatory is to be revived just as soon as you get enough letters, but that is only half of the story. When are you going to bring back the features? They made up a large part of the personality that is missing.

The only thing I have to commend you on since the big switch is the last two covers. I liked the November one, but this January cover is the best to hit the stands in a long time, on any magazine.

In my opinion *Amazing* lived up to the title of "the aristocrat of science-fiction" because it had been with us so long. That day is gone. You put up an aristocratic front but left out the touch with the common fan of Science Fiction. Your society type illustrations lack the vim and vigor of the old artists' methods. The only ones that fit a science-fiction magazine were the ones for "No Way Out" and "The Universal Solvent." The others remind me of *Galaxy* illustrations—they don't spike my imagination to want to read the story.

But enough of the harpoons for the time being. You will surely have to improve in the near future.

There is one question that keeps puzzling me these long years. Maybe somewhere along the line I missed out on a copy of *Amazing* that would have answered my questions. Whatever happened to the Shaver Mystery? Or am I on touchy ground now? I do know that Shaver continued to write after he left your pages, that occasionally you see his name. But what was the outcome of the Mystery?

Guy E. Terwilleger,
1412 Albright Street,
Boise, Idaho.

● *The personality of Amazing Stories did change drastically with the change in format. Perhaps your editor was mistaken in dropping the features that appeared in the former format. He doesn't know that even yet; but he is willing to find out. So, as a means of finding out, back go the features: a Readers' Section, the action story, the double-spread action illustrations, a fanzine review column, a book-review column by the reviewer of science-fiction books for the New York*

Times—Villiers Gerson. *Some of these changes will require a little time to put into practice, but they'll come through as quickly as possible. . . . The Shaver Mystery was dropped almost six years ago—at least from the pages of Amazing. As far as we're concerned, the Mystery is still a mystery—and always will be.*—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

Having finished the January issue of *Amazing Stories*, I decided to write you this letter. The stories "No Way Out" and "Plague Planet" were great. I hope you keep the stories by Jorgensen coming. All the other tales were good.

Rembach did a swell cover but the inside drawings weren't up to the standards of some of the other science-fiction mags. The only good art were Orban's and the cartoons.

How about a story by Sheckley sometime in the future? I think he is tops. Keep the stories coming, and I'm all for a Readers' Page. *Amazing Stories* is new to me. I've only been reading it for about half a year but you can be sure I'll not miss any of the coming issues.

Dan Adkins,
General Delivery,
East Liverpool, Ohio.

● *Actually Rembach is the pen name (do artists have pen names?) for Edward Valigursky—probably the best science-fiction cover artist in the field today. We like to feel that recent covers on both Amazing Stories and Fantastic have improved tremendously in the past few months; we hope you think so, too. . . . You'll notice that the magazine's interior artwork takes a big step upward in this issue; that, too, will continue. . . . Robert Sheckley's stories are always welcome to us; we happen to think, along with you, that he is tops!*—ED.

SPEAK RIGHT UP!

This is your department. Friend or foe, Democrat, Republican or Prohibitionist, teen-ager or octogenarian—your letters are welcome. Both your praise and your gripes will go into these pages, complete and unabridged (within reason, of course!). Address: *Amazing Stories*, 366 Madisan Avenue, New York 17, N. Y.

door. "Very poor leftovers, too. They taste like hell."

"You've got to do something," cried the distraught Jason who at that moment wouldn't have laughed at one of his own jokes. "She chases anything in pants!"

"Well, you wanted her more amorous."

"Sure. But only for me."

Johnson shrugged his shoulders. "You didn't specify that. My instructions are to take everything literally."

"This is driving me crazy. You got me into this. You've got to get me out."

"Well, do you want her taller, shorter, fatter, thinner? Want to make a champion log-roller out of her?"

"Stop being so facetious. You know what I want."

"Frankly, I don't," replied the rejected comedian acidly. "I find you unreasonable, flighty, capricious and carping and I'm recommending your name be struck from the rolls of our sucker list."

"I want her just the way she used to be."

"You mean with thin hips and completely intellectual?"

"No, I mean the real original! I never realized how wonderful she was. That dear, dear Julie who made the

cutest jokes about Kafka and never looked at another man but me." He grabbed Johnson's right arm which disconcertingly came off. "You've got to change her back to her own old self!" He dropped the disembodied arm on the floor. "Ugh!"

"I was only trying to be disarming," said Johnson retrieving his limb.

"Well, change her back and stop pulling cheap gags!"

"All right, all right. Don't get so hectic. She's changed."

"You . . . you mean, now she's the way she used . . ."

"Now she's in her original state." Johnson smiled triumphantly. "And, my boy, you've used up your three wishes!"

"I don't care," said Jason sighing with relief, "as long as I've got my darling original Julie back again!"

"This is all very amusing," said Johnson starting to disappear member by member. "Very amusing."

"What do you mean by that crack?"

"It's obvious you don't know what almost every husband knows about his wife."

"What's that?"

The devil laughed. "We made the original."

—Continued from back cover

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